

Keeping Ethiopia In Permanent Suspense –

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SEPTEMBER 20, 2017 16:42

–The Unraveling of Ethiopia’s Ethnic-Federalism– By Aklog Birara (DR)

If you think Ethiopian rulers’ camouflage in the application of democracy in a multiethnic setting is working, think again. It is not working. On the contrary, it is undermining the social fabric of Ethiopian society built over thousands of years. Numerous reputable experts and think tanks such as the International Crisis Center had foreseen the pitfalls of ethnic federalism. Sadly, we failed to seize the opportunity and prevent the pitfalls.



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I had argued in my book *Waves* that, from its conception and inception, ethnic federalism was not intended to advance human freedom, justice, the rule of law, sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development. In its well-researched REPORT 153, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and Its Discontents*, 4 SEPTEMBER 2009, the International Crisis Group (ICG) had projected the unraveling of Ethiopia’s ethnic-federal system. In this seminal piece, ICG said this:

“The Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by its chairman and prime minister, Meles Zenawi, has radically reformed Ethiopia’s political system. The regime transformed the hitherto centralized state into the Federal Democratic Republic and also redefined citizenship, politics and identity on ethnic grounds.” The constitution offered autonomy and self-administration to the regions (Kilil). However, decentralization was never honored by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (the TPLF) that commands the party, the state and the government at all levels. For all practical purposes, there is no distinction among the three institutions.

This redefinition of “citizenship, politics and identity on ethnic grounds” offered the TPLF overwhelming power to use and misuse these terms in accordance with changing needs. The TPLF made sure that Ethiopian citizenship is completely diminished and replaced by ethnic identity. In accordance with Article 39, each Kilil or region interpreted ethnic identity, autonomy and self-rule in line with its own vision and mission.

For example, the Tigray region felt entitled to annex neighboring lands and incorporate them into Greater Tigray. The TPLF justified land annexation and incorporation on the

grounds that the indigenous population is endowed with its own identity as an ethnic group, Qimant is the most prominent of these. The TPLF resettles Tigreans in annexed lands in order to make sure that referendums become viable. The consequence of this type of deliberate selection and promotion of identity and resettlement of preferred nationals is massive dislocation. The highly centralized federal system justifies the creation of new identities as well as the annexation and incorporation of lands because the TPLF dictates the adjudication process.

In other words, the ethnic federal system proves to be a well-tested instrument of minority ethnic party hegemony at the federal and local levels.

Equally important is the undeniable political practice of make-believe elections that always offer the TPPLF dominated EPRDF a winning formula. It controls the media, civil society institutions as well as political parties. This is because it is the governing party that defines and dictates who can and cannot compete in local and federal elections. All federal employees, estimated at 6-7 million are members of the EPRDF. Each and everyone is expected to vote for the ruling part unless he or she wishes to take a risk. It is a matter of survival.

Whether at the federal or local level, the governing party makes sure that members and the rest of society behave through a network of spies that I shall discuss below.

Aside from defining “citizenship, politics and identity” the TPLF/EPRDF tried to persuade the world community as well as Ethiopian citizens that it was committed to sustainable and equitable development. The ploy worked. The party received massive aid. The ICG report notes this. “The intent was to create a more prosperous, just and representative state for all its people. Yet, despite continued economic growth and promised democratization, there is growing discontent with the EPRDF’s ethnically defined state and rigid grip on power and fears of continued inter-ethnic conflict. The international community should take Ethiopia’s governance problems much more seriously and adopt a more principled position towards the government. Without genuine multi-party democracy, the tensions and pressures in Ethiopia’s politics will only grow, greatly increasing the possibility of a violent eruption that would destabilize the country and region.”

The current civil conflicts between the Ogaden and Oromia regions and the deliberate ethnic conflict created by the TPLF in Gondar illustrate the destabilizing influence of deliberate “redefinition of citizenship, politics and identity on ethnic grounds” rather than on citizenship as Ethiopians.

The potentially consequential conflicts that are erupting throughout the country did not happen. They have been in the making since the TPLF took power in 1991. There is a convergence of external and internal actors.

Not so long ago, leaders of the Western world showered a few leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa with accolades primarily for their progressive ideas and for their transformative leadership skills. Among those elevated to a coveted club of “elites” were Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, in power until he passed, Paul Kagame of Rwanda in power since 2000 and Yoweri Kaguta Museveni of Uganda in power since 1986. These leaders were embraced by the West and invited to global conferences and summits such as the World Economic Forum for a reason that has nothing to do with the welfare of their own people. The motive was national interest in general and the war against terrorism in particular. The

most visible of Africa's "Renaissance men" groomed and elevated was Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, former American President Bill Clinton and others who gave Meles kudos were well aware that he was first and foremost a narrow ethnic nationalist who embraced Stalinism as a core ideology under the guise of liberating Ethiopia's "nations, nationalities and peoples" from prison. The TPLF for which Meles was the leading intellect and ideologue and one of its prominent executive members was equally instrumental in cultivating, creating and promoting ethnic based parties subordinate to the TPLF.

These ethnic-based parties mushroomed at the expense of multiparty democracy and multinational or multiethnic parties, most prominently EPRP and Meison at the time.

Foreign powers, especially the United States, cherry-picked emerging parties such as the TPLF that were ready to serve their national interests as the region's policemen. The TPLF and its ethnic elite allies benefitted hugely from the West's largesse. This is the quid pro quo that still dominates Ethiopian political life.

It is therefore not ironic at all that Western democracies saw no contradiction or inconsistency between the universally acknowledged and accepted definition of federalism (American, Belgian and Canadian, Indian etc. that is based on the rule of law and checks and balances) and the ethnic-federalism imposed on the Ethiopian people by the TPLF and its ethnic allies that believes in the premise, to use Mao's dictum that "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Ethnic fragmentation and ethnic conflict is designed to prolong TPLF rule. Keeping Ethiopian society in suspense is a means or a tool to prolong power.

At least, Mao did not fight feudalism, imperialism and other isms to con foreign friends and the people in order to enrich himself. He fought for his country and the vast majority of its poor and deprived people. He created a strong foundation that has now transformed China to become one of the most powerful nations on the planet. Experts estimate that nationalist and patriotic China and democratic India will emerge as the two "most powerful nations" in the coming decades. Among other things, they have a sense of national purpose. They have created social cohesion.

In contrast, Ethiopia suffers from a political architecture of permanent friction and suspense. The TPLF rules not only through the "barrel of the gun" but also through a recurrent system of ethnic and religious divide and rule; and through the destruction of all national and or multiethnic institutions, especially political parties.

In most cases, ethnic parties such as the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) that celebrated its 35th anniversary at a huge cost to the Amhara poor survives and thrives because of the TPLF. ANDM is totally disavowed by the Amhara people. Yet, it exists. The Gondar region suffers the most because the ANDM. The concocted conflict between the Amhara and the Qimant population that showed the total moral bankruptcy of the TPLF is a consequence of political divide and rule.

This electoral defeat is not the end of the story. The TPLF will ensure that the Amhara and Qimant population that voted in favor of union will pay a price. Further, the Qimant/Amhara referendum is just the beginning. The next referendum will be on Wolkait/Tegede etc. There is no end in sight until and unless the Ethiopian people rise up in unison and get rid of their tormentors.

Why did the West, especially the U.S. A. choose Meles and shower him with unprecedented aid? The deal between the West and other foreign powers on the one hand and the TPLF led by Meles on the other hand was made while the TPLF was a guerilla fighting force. Meles Zenawi committed his regime to serve as a “policeman” in the war against terrorism in the Horn of Africa. In return the government of the United States offered the Meles regime more than \$30 billion in bilateral aid. It also encouraged multilateral donors such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund to provide massive amounts of aid with little or no oversight.

As far as I know, no single government official within the government of the United States questioned the wisdom of granting billions of dollars of American aid to state thieves. Why? Because these state thieves provide critical and strategic services to the U.S. and other foreign governments. Following the inauguration of President Trump, the new U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expressed appreciation for Ethiopian-American friendship that had begun under Emperor Menilik. “A warm friendship connects the Ethiopian and American people.” I agree with this statement.

What disturbs Ethiopians is the lack of distinction of the “warm friendship of the American and Ethiopian people” that should endure and the unqualified support the government of the U.S. continues to give to one of the most oppressive governments on the planet. It is puzzling when U.S. officials say unequivocally that “We remain committed to working with Ethiopia to foster liberty, democracy, economic growth, protection of human rights, and the rule of law.”

How does the U.S. plan to promote “the rule of law and human rights” with a government that murders more than 1,000 innocent Ethiopians for protesting peacefully? How does the U.S. department of state find it defensible to argue that “Ethiopia remains among the most effective development partners, particularly in the areas of health care, education, and food security” while the UNDP and the World Economic Forum conclude that Ethiopia is at the bottom of the annual human development index?

The reason for America’s laudatory comments resides outside Ethiopia’s human development and the wellbeing of 105 million people. “Fifteen years ago, the U.S. began setting up very different centers, filled with technology that is not normally associated with the protection of human rights. In the aftermath of 9/11, according to classified U.S. documents published Wednesday by The Intercept, the National Security Agency forged a relationship with the Ethiopian government that has expanded exponentially over the years. What began as one small facility soon grew into a network of clandestine eavesdropping outposts designed to listen in on the communications of Ethiopians and their neighbors across the Horn of Africa in the name of counterterrorism.”

America is heavily invested in the Ethiopian regime. Given American national interest in the fight against terrorism in the Horn of Africa, the TPLF dominated government of Ethiopia felt totally justified and empowered not only to spy on its citizens (the five to one network of surveillance system); but also to take extrajudicial measures against all dissidents.

Extrajudicial actions against innocent Ethiopians are justified because the regime is fighting terrorism. Tragically, the U.S. is now widely perceived among Ethiopians and

other Africans that it is “instrumental in creating a terrorist regime under the guise of anti-terrorism.”

What did the U.S. gain by foregoing human rights in Ethiopia? “In exchange for local knowledge and an advantageous location, the National Security Agency (NSA) provided the East African nation with technology and training integral to electronic surveillance.

“According to Intercept on which much of the revelations on the quid pro quo are made, “Ethiopia’s position provides the partnership unique access to the targets” (U.S. classified 2005 report, one of 294 internal NSA newsletters released today by The Intercept.)

While I understand America’s national interest in the fight against terrorism, there is no convincing evidence that the TPLF/EPRDF regime that terrorizes its own people is a reliable and credible ally in the long-term. U.S. collaboration with a regime that takes extrajudicial measures against peaceful protestors, encourages elites to fight against one another, grabs lands and displaces tens of thousands of Ethiopians from their lands, plunders billions of dollars from the poor etc. cannot “foster liberty, democracy, economic growth, protection of human rights, and the rule of law.”

On the contrary there is a plethora of evidence that shows that Ethiopia’s security forces have taken “draconian” measures against any dissenter, journalist, political leader and democratic activist within and outside the country. Felix Horne of Human Rights Watch is right when he says that “The Ethiopian government uses surveillance not only to fight terrorism and crime, but as a key tactic in its abusive efforts to silence dissenting voices in-country...Essentially anyone that opposes or expresses dissent against the government is considered to be an ‘anti-peace element’ or a ‘terrorist.’”

The United States government should be concerned about Ethiopia because the regime it bankrolls is one of the most repressive and corrupt regimes on the planet. The TPLF/EPRDF is a liability and not an asset. On September 19, 2017, Newsweek quoted the American Embassy in Addis Ababa that posted a statement saying that it was “disturbed by the troubling reports” on “ethnic violence and the large-scale displacement of people” along the border between Ethiopia’s two largest regions, Oromia and Somali.” Ethiopians are killing one another while the federal government watches on the side until it is too late. Who is accountable for the tragedy?

The U. S. Embassy statement urges “The Ethiopian government to conduct a transparent investigation into all allegations of violence and to hold those responsible accountable.” The Embassy could have added the deliberate and sinister referendum in Gondar that has the potential to lead to civil conflict and the displacement of tens of thousands.

I conclude from this destabilizing trend perpetrated by the TPLF core that:

Ethiopians need to set aside their differences and forge a unity of national purpose;

Ethiopians in the Diaspora should commend the U.S. Congress for adopting a far reaching human rights legislation on Ethiopia; and urge the Trump administration to adopt it;

Ethiopians must admonish the Tigray People’s Liberation Front dominated EPRDF for perpetuating ethnic divide and rule that has become anathema to Ethiopia’s durability as a sovereign state; and Ethiopians must think beyond ethnicity and commit themselves to the formation of a “genuine multi-party democracy” now rather than later.

We can longer afford to sit on the side, watch and see the growing ethnic tensions that are no doubt engineered by members of the ruling party as well as by external forces that could potentially lead Ethiopia and its 105 million people to the abyss.