

## **Addis Ababa:**

### **Drawing a Line in the Sand of Ethnic Politics**

Recent events are bringing Ethiopia closer to the limit beyond which ethnic politics enters into a zone perilous to the alliance of the ruling parties and, by extension, to the unity of the country. Among these events, the most explosive one is the rise of tension and deep divisions generated by protests in the Oromo region over the issue of Addis Ababa and the subsequent declaration of ODP (Oromo Democratic Party), a major partner in the ruling coalition, claiming ownership of Addis Ababa. The claim goes further than the usual demand for recognition of special rights of Oromia over the capital and clearly testifies to the growing impact of Oromo extremists on the ODP.

Observers and activists supporting the ongoing change no longer hide their disappointment over ODP's declaration, especially over the surprising twist of its leader, Lemma Megersa, who so far was very much liked for his trans-ethnic openness. Many extend their disappointment to the Prime Minister, who, they say, is not forceful enough in the defense of the autonomous status of Addis Ababa. The ultimate fear is that the claim and the tepid reactions on the part of the parties in power may be the beginning of a déjà-vu trend, namely, the insidious evolution of one partner of the coalition into a hegemonic ruler.

Without questioning the well-founded nature of these disappointments, it is important to understand the rationale of the behaviors causing the setbacks. In my last posted response to Andreas Eshete and Samuel Assefa's article, "Reflections on Expanding Ethiopia's Democratic Space," I underlined, in agreement with the article, the tension existing between the Pan-Ethiopian ideology of the reformers and their ethnic political basis. I wrote: "It stands to reason that the integration of nationalist and populist demands is the only way by which the various parties composing the EPRDF can compete against their rival regional parties and maintain their political relevance." The issue of Addis Ababa is where the competition plays out in its most divisive and disruptive implications, given that all rival Oromo parties openly support the integration of the federal capital into Oromia. Evidently, some such extremist claim does not give much room to maneuver for those struggling to unite ethnic politics with a Pan-Ethiopian agenda and is thus quite efficient in undermining Abiy's position.

Let us go further. In an article I posted early October titled "Where to Be, on the Right or Left of Abiy? That Is the Question," I noted that Abiy's determination to combine ethnic politics and Pan-Ethiopian ideology so covered the whole political space of moderation that rival Oromo ethnic parties had no other choice than to opt for extremism in order to retain some political significance. I wrote: "As to competing political groups with moderate views, their problem is Abiy in that he is too big to the point of covering the entire political space. Consequently, these groups try to create new spaces for them by moving on the right or left of Abiy." Addis Ababa is a perfect illustration of the dilemma compelling Oromo political parties to give up moderation in order to be politically relevant.

It is only when we understand the dilemma of Abiy and other Oromo reformists that we can temper the tendency of losing faith in the ongoing reform. Some supporters have already crossed the threshold by alluding to a scam to advance the long term goal of Oromo ethno-nationalists under the guise of reform. Yet, it is but obvious that the need to appeal to a carefully elaborated scheme subsides as soon as one carefully examines the sticky situation arising from Abiy's commitment to implement, for the first time in Ethiopia, fair and free national elections. Nothing is easier than to inflame people by irresponsible and extremist rhetoric, especially where poverty, unemployment, and lack of democratic tradition prevail so extensively.

The question, then, is as follows: short of having recourse to authoritarian methods, what other option is there to counter extremism in a democratic national election taking place in a volatile situation? The solution I have recommended many times, namely, the election of a president with extensive executive power by universal suffrage, alongside regional elections on ethnic lines, requires a change in the constitution that is difficult to achieve given the prevailing political atmosphere.

The remaining way out is exactly what Addis Ababians seem to understand and initiate under the leadership of the indomitable Eskinder Nega, which is to mobilize and organize in defense of the autonomous status of the capital. The mobilization must target the de-ethnicization of the town as the unambiguous confirmation that it effectively belongs to Addis Ababians and all the peoples of Ethiopia. In addition, the cosmopolitan character of Addis Ababa must comprise its African vocation both as the birthplace and the seat of African Union and other pan-African organizations. In other words, the defense must not solely rely on the federal government and the provision of the Constitution stating that Addis Ababa is "the capital city of the Federal State" with "a full measure of self-government." It has to include the understanding and the practical readiness stemming from one basic fact: Addis Ababians have only those rights that they can effectively defend. Moreover, as collective owners of the capital, all other ethnic groups and regional states must provide tangible support to the cause of autonomy and self-government.

Only when Addis Ababians organize to defend their town does the stake become clear to everybody. The stake is none other than the rights of people to govern themselves by freely electing their representatives and defending peacefully these rights. It is incumbent on the federal government to explain clearly that going against these rights, not only will lead to violence, but it will also permanently damage the consensus and mutual respect governing the ruling alliance of parties as well as the initiated democratization of the country. Needless to say, such a reversal will land us right where we were before the demise of the Woyanne dictatorship, with all the disastrous consequences that an Oromo hegemonic rule will necessarily have on the preservation of peace and national unity.

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