

Ethiopia: A Vision for a Peaceable and Just Multiethnic State

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Background

Ethiopia is known to many as an ancient civilization. While this is a sacred myth for many Ethiopians who take pride in the glorious heritage of their country, the contemporary Ethiopian is the product of 19th century imperial conquests and boundary delimitation agreements with the surrounding colonial powers. In this view, it can be stated that the contemporary Ethiopian states is the result of the same forces that created states in the rest of Africa.

Since its creation, Ethiopia's leaders have been engaged in nation-building. The task included the creation of a national identity, an effective government and a stable nation at peace with itself and its neighbors. The founding emperor, Emperor Menelik II (r.1889-1913), exercised control internally only in the core regions of the state on the central Ethiopian highlands. The communities on the outer periphery along the international borders were not brought under the control of the new state until the 1930s and 1940s.

When the state eventually relative gained control of the delimited international borders, it was not successful in making citizens out of the conquered subjects even as late as the end of the twentieth century. Three successive regimes—the imperial (1941-74), the military (1974-91), and the incumbent—tried to build a settled and stable state that can secure its borders, provide core services to its populations, and gain the consent of the ruled to its claim to legitimate authority. All three have not succeeded in their efforts.

According to the political scientist John Markakis, a lifetime observer of Ethiopian politics, the regimes failed to achieve national integration because *“elites at the center failed to share power in any meaningful way with the elites of the subjugated periphery. More importantly, the conquered people were made subjects and remained subject.”*

For Ethiopia to become a multiethnic democratic state where citizens can live in justice and peace, the country needs to overcome the challenges of national integration and political transitions. Resolving these two national challenges is a precondition to addressing the longstanding quests for peace, stability and escape from poverty. If Ethiopia’s leaders fail to address these major challenges, the country has little prospect of remaining a unified state.

1. National Integration

For much of the twentieth century, the House of Menelik, hailing from the northern central provinces, dominated national political and economic power. The people in the *highland periphery* (the Oromo, the Gurage or the Kambata) remain unintegrated to the state system politically. The subjugated people in the *lowland periphery* (the Afar, Gambella or the Somali) have not been integrated into the state politically, economically and culturally. As the political scientist Lahra Smith observes, *“a century after they were incorporated into the Ethiopian state, the subjugated ethnic groups in southern and western Ethiopia still had very little sense of “meaningful citizenship.”* As long as the imbalance of power that marginalizes the subjugated people remains in place, Ethiopia cannot overcome its challenge of state-building.

2. Violent Transitions

Since the creation of the empire, political transitions in Ethiopia have always been effected through extra-constitutional means. Power was transferred from Emperor Iyasu to Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1916 by a palace coup, from Haile Sellassie to Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1974 by a popular uprising, and from Mengistu to Meles in 1991 through a triumph of guerilla forces.

Violent transitions occurred because incumbent rulers stayed in power much longer than they were supposed to, often ignoring warning signs that their mandate has expired. Military coups d'état were staged against Emperor Haile Sellassie (1941-74) and President Mengistu Hailemariam (1976-1991) in 1960 and in 1989 respectively. In 2015-16, an unprecedented nation-wide protest, now known as the Oromo protest, occurred with people demanding respect for rights enshrined in the Ethiopian constitution.

In the first two cases, the leaders killed the generals who staged the coups d'état and went ahead with their rules as if nothing had happened. Similarly, the incumbent regime responded with unprecedented violence killing thousands and incarcerating hundreds of thousands. The violence did not suppress the movement. The protests are ongoing nearly two years since they began. The regime has thus far failed to heed the events as signs of the pent-up popular discontent and evaluate its policies. The regime is unlikely to survive the ongoing uprisings. The stubbornness of its leaders only makes way for yet another violent transition.

The challenges that led to the collapse of the previous regimes remain unresolved. As Markakis observes: *"At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the incumbent regime in Addis Ababa is engaged in the same battles that exhausted its predecessors, impoverished the country, and blasted*

peoples' hopes for peace, democracy and an escape from dire poverty." It is worth-examining what the incumbent Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Forces (EPRDF) has done to mitigate the issue of power-sharing.

A New Political Dispensation?

When the EPRDF came to power, it promised a new political dispensation. The leaders attempted to address the problem of national integration through federalization of the state structure and the problem of violent transitions through democratization of politics. For the first time in the country's history, hope loomed high that democratization would transform subjects into citizens with voice in their government and federalization would resolve the question of national integration specifically by addressing the twinned problems of Ethiopian politics: land ownership and ethnic identity.

Ethiopia's democratization process was formally set in motion by the proclamation of the Ethiopian Constitution of 1995. The test as to whether Ethiopia was on the path to democratization and federalization came during the national elections of 2005. Even though, the elections were free and fair by Ethiopian standards, the results were rejected by the governing EPRDF party. Unwilling to concede significant loss of seats in parliament and the consequent loss of power through elections, the government nullified the elections and violently suppressed the ensuing protest of people demanding that their votes be respected.

Consequently, the hope for a peaceful transfer of power, the currently accepted test of a successful democracy, failed to occur. Democratization was effectively derailed. In the aftermath of the crackdown, the EPRDF envisaged it could prevent popular grievances from forming a national consciousness and

result in a national resistance by tightly 1) controlling the political space, 2) dominating the economic realm and 3) centralizing the governing institutions (the structure of power) of the Ethiopian state.

Controlling the political Space

In 2006, Ethiopia's late Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, made the EPRDF's version of democratization public, declaring its goal to be the creation of a "dominant party democracy." In this variant of democracy, elections were allowed to take place, but only to confirm the ruling party in power. The proposition was predicated on the rationale that competitive elections that produce frequent change of power weren't suitable for the kind of sustainable economic growth that Ethiopia needed. In practice, this meant that the EPRDF would remain in power until Ethiopia had achieved a status of a "middle income country" in 2025.

To achieve this goal, the prime minister asserted, Ethiopia needed a "developmental state," not necessarily a democratic state. He articulated this theory that development must precede democracy as follows:

Where the circumstances for a developmental state do not exist, the chances for a stable democracy to emerge are indeed very remote. Where they exist, while there is no guarantee for democracy, there is a reasonable chance for a developmental and democratic state to emerge (Zenawi, Africa's Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings p. 14).

The implication is unambiguous. It is justifiable to continue to be undemocratic for the sake of development because the latter can increase the chances for a stable democracy. Conversely, democratization cannot guarantee development without which the country itself could disintegrate.

In effect, the “developmental state” became the ideology that undergirded the EPRDF’s refusal to share power. Declared the official policy of the government in 2006, measures were taken to put the ideology into practice. In the local and district elections of 2008, the EPRDF “won” 100% of the seats in local and municipal parliaments. In the 2010 national elections, the EPRDF “won” 99 percent of the seats in the national parliament. In the 2015 national elections 100 percent of the seats. There was no place for opposition and hence for democracy. The ritual of authoritarian elections in which votes were cast but not counted became a symbol of democratization without popular participation.

After winning large super majorities in parliament, the ruling party passed laws that restricted the right to expression (Press Law, 2008), right to association (Civil Society Law, 2009), and the right to assembly (Anti-Terrorism Law, 2009). Constitutional courts were turned into instruments for suppression of dissent and persecution of political opponents. Constitutionally protected human rights were violated with impunity. The promise of the rule of law was substituted by practice of rule by law.

In addition to concentrating power in the hands the same party, the Ethiopian version of the developmental state also envisioned a society that cannot deviate from the official line or state-sanctioned public discourse. Meles Zenawi, the architect of the developmental state ideology, put it in such Orwellian manner that:

When Revolutionary Democracy permeates the entire society, individuals will start to think alike and all persons will cease having their own independent outlook. In this order, individual thinking becomes simply part of collective thinking because the individual will not be in a position

to reflect on concepts that have not been prescribed by Revolutionary Democracy.” (Meles Zenawi cited in Milkias, 2011, p. 59).

Meles sought to forge a national consensus around his development project through ideological and discourse uniformity in which the party speaks with ‘one voice’ for the whole country. By implication, opposition voice would be dubbed anti-democratic and anti-development. Silenced by law, the people were denied a voice and a government of their choice.

Dominance in the Economic Realm

Once the state was fully captured, it was used to corner the national market place to make way for TPLF dominance in the economic realm. Dominance was achieved through several means: the party businesses (parbus), military business (milibus) and the oligarchs. The EPRDF currently owns businesses worth almost a fifth of the country’s GDP if one adds up the net worth of four mega businesses the ruling party coalition partners own.

Party Businesses

The main actor in the party owned businesses is the TPLF’s Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT). Numbers are hard to obtain but EFFORT is estimated to own 66 companies worth \$3 billion that are involved in all sectors of the economy ranging from agriculture to manufacturing to banking and transportation. It has in particular cornered the trucking market in landlocked Ethiopia.

The ruling coalition members also own for-profit companies that are registered as endowments. These are TIRET of Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), TUMSA Endowment (formerly Dinsho) of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), and WONDO Group controlled by

Southern People's Democratic Organization (SEPDM). These entities are holding companies that operate across several economic sectors. The Tumsa group has been variously described as the 'second largest private sector firm in Ethiopia. Given the parbus's range of sectoral involvement, the economic strength these party-affiliated business groups indicate the dominant position of the EPRDF in the Ethiopian economy.

Military Businesses (Milibus)

In addition to the Parbus's widespread involvement in the business sector, the EPRDF government has taken steps to increase the military's stake in the economy. In 2010, the government created the Metal and Engineering Corporation (MetEC). Officially a vehicle for technology transfer to the country, MetEC, is involved practically in all sectors of the economy, manufacturing, construction, and energy, transportation. As such, the military has become an economically powerful actor. Mandated to manufacture and supply weapons to the country's defense forces, MetEC produces armored vehicles, explosives, ammunition, big guns, light weapons and personal weapons. The Ethiopian defense force needs to import only military aviation and high tech military intelligence equipment.

Oligarchs

The story of the *nuveau riche* that pop up overnight cannot be documented but the evidence of their influence is ubiquitous. Most of these wealthy individuals are upstarts whose source of investment is dubious. Some are former high-ranking officials and retired generals who have grown fabulously wealthy after leaving government service. Others are politically connected investors who have used political patronage to their advantage. One example of this is

Mohammad Ali Al-Amoudi's MIDROC business conglomerate which has investments worth \$2 billion in 2015. They are involved in all sectors of the economy, including mining, energy, manufacturing, construction, banking, agriculture and interests in Ethiopia.

The overall effect of these businesses has been the stifling of private initiatives. As Berhanu Abegaz (2013) points out, the EPRDF has been a market-supplanting party that has denied private entrepreneurs access to "the most lucrative sectors and driven them out of the chance to compete in the market place. In effect, party companies not only limit competition but also cause prices for critical supplies and services to remain artificially high. In other words, the capacity of politically-connected businesses for market distortion is very high.

Parbus in effect corrupts the emergent democratic system by obliterating the boundary between state and party, rigging electoral and political financing, over-politicizing the government, and regimenting and co-opting civic society organizations. In practice, the developmental state became the ideology and mechanism that legitimized state capture with the view to establishing a one party supremacy of the political economy of the country.

Centralizing Governing

The single most important resource that Ethiopia could offer up for investors is land. According the country's constitution, land is a vital resource owned by the state. Ideologically, state ownership of land is consistent with TPLF's belief that it is the protector of rural owner-operators against wealthy capitalists. In practice, land was to be administered by the regional governments. In its eagerness to give investors unfettered access to agricultural lands, the EPRDF-

led government found it necessary to pass laws that made sure the federal government retained control of land and control of the ultimate authority to decide who receives land.

At the federal level, Proclamation No. 89/1997, which recognized the regional state control of land, was repealed and replaced by Proclamation No. 456/2005. The regional states were also forced to change their laws to conform to the federal proclamation. In general, the revised laws favored investors over farmers and pastoralists. After years of paternalistic arguments in defense of farmers against private investors, the government opened the gates to the farm lands for foreign and domestic capital owners with generous terms and unlimited acres of land with minimum restrictions and oversight. Hence the slogan “land to the tiller” was reframed as “land to the investor.”

The land transfer to rich investors reached its climax in 2014 when the Ethiopian government unveiled the Addis Ababa and Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Integrated Development Master Plan. The proposed plan was intended to transfer control of 1.1 million hectares of land from the Oromia region to the Addis Ababa, expanding the city to more than 20 times its existing size. The plan was unconstitutional on many levels. It also violated the federal arrangement that invested the power to administer land in the regional states. The Master Plan and other land grabbing schemes resulted in provoking local resistance in the Oromia region which subsequently spread to the Amhara region and other parts of Ethiopia.

Resistance and Refusal

Resistance first came from within the party structure at a meeting held in Adama town on April 12-14, 2014 for the Oromia regional state employees who were designated to implement the plan. The officials who came to in effect deliver orders to implement the plan expected no objection from 'loyal" OPDO party cadres. What transpired was a surprising turn of events, in which members of the ruling party showed signs of defiance of party discipline and loyalty and unleashed full-throttle attack against the federal government's overreach. The epochal phenomenon that now is known as the Oromo protest ensued. It has shaken the regime to its foundation.

The federal arrangement that seemed to respond to the unresolved issue of the national question couldn't survive the developmental state. The kind of state-led growth program that the developmental state envisioned requires centralized macroeconomic planning and management which in turn demands effective control of resources, particularly land. By design, federal arrangement requires devolution of power to the states. The regime found it to be an impediment to its conception of development.

Once development was presented as a matter of national survival, nothing else mattered, not the constitution, not the federal arrangement. Not even the wellbeing of the people mattered when "development" was in the line. At the center, the struggle for control of land became a typical feature of the struggle for power and the economy. By resorting to centralization and concentration of power and wealth in the hands of emergent political and business elite, the incumbent regime is repeating the mistakes of its predecessors. It is has been given the warning shots. It has chosen to ignore it at its own peril.

Obstacles and Opportunities

In a book published in 1999, Leenco Lata, former Deputy Secretary General of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), examined the failure of democratization in Ethiopia and gave a stark prediction: *“The Ethiopian state must be further decentralized, decolonized and democratized if it is to escape the harrowing consequences of disintegration.”* This statement is more valid today than the time it was made. Having subverted democratization, the TPLF-led regime has now brought the country to the verge of disintegration.

The most intractable obstacle to democracy is the internal undemocratic way the EPRDF is structured. In the Executive Committee of the EPRDF, each member party in the coalition has 9 representatives regardless of the size of people they represent. The TPLF represents 6% of the population. The OPDO represents 45%. But each has 25% representation in the governing party. Without undoing this overrepresentation of the minority in the party structure the EPRDF would never be able to carry out democratic reform in national politics.

Moreover, the EPRDF hasn't shown an inclination to embrace reform and regain legitimacy for its rule. After a state of emergency that lasted for nearly a year failed to suppress the Oromo protest, the regime appears to have no recourse left to save its power and stabilize the country. The main members of the EPRDF coalition, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and OPDO, seem to be pulling away from the TPLF core. The economy is experiencing a downward pressure further limiting the regime's capacity to finance security operations. The governing party is politically immobilized.

Further sign of the deepening crisis is the Somali regional government, using the paramilitary force known as *Liyu Hayil* (Special Force), making

incursions and grabbing neighboring Oromo districts and committing ethnic-cleansing. The central government has not been able or willing to come to the rescue of victims of the Somali Special Force aggression can be regarded as an indication of the onset of state collapse. With two important regional states in the federation in conflict, it is not sounding alarmist to state that the first stage of the Yugoslavization of Ethiopia has begun.

At this particular juncture in the country's history, the ongoing Oromo protests, using such nonviolent tactics as mass protests, boycotts, blockades, strikes, and civil disobedience, have increased the chances of a successful transition from an authoritarian dominant-party system to democratic rule are relatively. They have challenged the legitimacy of and eroded support for the country's authoritarian rulers. Realizing the momentum of an increasingly powerful civic movement, reformers within the powerholding elite, particularly OPDO leaders, have apparently switched sides to lend support for the demands of the Oromo movement. Stubborn in the face of mounting crises, the EPRDF doesn't seem prepared to initiate a negotiated settlement to democratic rule.

This may not hold true for long. We have witnessed elsewhere in the world authoritarian powerholders seeking transition to a limited democracy to avert a social explosion, promote growth, or avoid international condemnation. Similarly, we can expect the EPRDF to institute the following confidence-building measures to give chance to an orderly transition.

1. *Repeal unconstitutional laws:* The Anti-Terrorist Law is more about suppressing opposition than averting terrorist threats; the Press Law silences of dissent and limits the citizens' rights to free expression; the Civil Society and Charities Law was intended to limit civil society activities and promotion of a culture of social and political engagement. Laws that are designed expressly to prevent citizens

from exercising the human rights enshrined in the constitution should be repealed.

2. *Release all political prisoners*: opposition leaders who now languish in prison are victims of the unconstitutional laws. With the repeal of these laws, it follows that they should be released unconditionally.
3. *Reform the System*: The instruments for the EPRDF's dominant party rule are a justice system that is subservient to the will of the ruling party, a security system that works diligently to eliminate opposition; A national Election Board whose reason for existence to ensure the ruling party wins every election.

The Oromo protest that has now brought the EPRDF one-party dominance system to its knees is not anti-constitutional in its demands. In fact, it is a movement in defense of the constitution. The ruling party can begin to repair the broken constitutional rule and the federal arrangement simply by obeying the constitution. That will go a long way to resolving the two longstanding problems that have bedeviled the Ethiopian state since its founding.