

The Continuing Quest for Inclusive Democratic Governance in Ethiopia

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Abstract

As early as the 18th Century, James Bruce, a European traveler, observed that bad government was the most important source of the problems that plagued Ethiopian society. Centuries on, political and ethnic mistrust—and the polarization, insecurity, human rights abuses, and armed conflict that accompany them—characterize the Ethiopian body politic. Rule of law and democracy are far from taking root. This paper—pointing out the most outstanding governance deficits of the governments of Emperor Haile Selassie, the Derg, and EPRDF-cum-PP (Prosperity Party)—argues that the lack of inclusive democratic governance remains at the core of Ethiopia’s sociopolitical crises. It will offer suggestions on democratic governance options that, if adopted, will help deal with Ethiopia’s longstanding political ills.

Introduction

Ethiopia has existed as a polity in different sizes and shapes for centuries. It largely acquired its present geographical and socio-demographic composition towards the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century.¹ Until the 1974 popular Revolution swept the last monarch, Emperor Haile Selassie I (r.1930-1974), out of power, the main state power had been monarchical, with various kings or kings of kings succeeding one another at the helm of state power. Before the largely successful efforts of Emperor Menelik II (r. 1889-1913) to bring the diverse semi-sovereign entities inhabiting present-day Ethiopia under his central

¹ See Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia: 1855-1991* (2001).

political authority, in most cases these entities had different types of traditional local governance, largely recognizing the suzerainty of the distant monarch who often was represented by his officials in the various localities.² The spheres of influence of these semi-sovereign entities had never been constant, expanding and shrinking just as the territories and peoples under the direct, close control of the monarch had as well. It suffices to mention here that the expansion and conquest in the 16th and early 17th centuries of the Oromo clans and Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim (more commonly known as “አሕመድ ግራኝ - 'aḥemadē gerāñē” or Ahmed the left-handed) traversed the entirety of Ethiopia, including the present-day Eritrea. They conquered and were in turn conquered by different locales, advancing and being pushed back until the balance of power levelled out to produce the present territorial distribution of the dominant ethno-linguistic groups of the country.

The centralization of power by successive governments, starting with Emperor Menelik II, ignored local interests and uprooted local authorities and modes of governance. The centralization of power was intensified under Emperor Haile Selassie, especially from 1942 onwards to the end of his rule in 1974. The Derg that came to power following the 1974 Revolution took the centralization of power to the highest level, a decision no doubt was intensified by its leftist political orientation.

The TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front), the most committed of the anti-Derg movements, waged a consistent armed struggle against the Derg till 1991. The EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front), the coalition of four that the TPLF created and led, finally overthrew the Derg and assumed power in May 1991. As shall be elaborated later in this paper, the TPLF held the view that Ethiopia's political ills resulted from the oppression of other nationalities by the Amhara (particularly the Shewan Amhara). Once it assumed power, it quickly moved to attempt to implement its political program and the ideology it

² For example, historical records show that during the first half of the 16th century, the monarch's representative in different parts of the country was known as “አዝማች - 'azemāčē”; ይልማ ደሬሳ፡ የኢትዮጵያ ታሪክ በአስራ ስድስተኛው ክፍለ ዘመን (Yilma Deresa, ya' i'teyopeyā tārike ba 'ašerāšedesetañāwu kefelazamane [in Amharic, which translates into English as: Yilma Deresa, *A History of Ethiopia in the 16th century*] 227 [2006]).

held, which originated from its founders' student days at the Haile Sellassie I University (now Addis Ababa University) in the 1960s and early 1970s. These included reconstituting the country as a federation of nationalities, and granting each of them an "unconditional right to self-determination," including the right to a "full measure of self-government" within the federation and the right to secession if any of the nationalities so wishes.

In this paper, I shall attempt to refute the diagnosis made by the TPLF and the like that the main political problems of Ethiopia emanated from national oppression. I shall argue that the lack of inclusive democratic governance which affected every Ethiopian citizen, regardless of the ethnic group to which they belong, is the main reason for the socio-political ills of the country.

1. Explaining Ethiopia's Political Crises of the 20th Century

Scholars—both local and international—and political actors sought to explain the political crises of modern Ethiopia from different perspectives. The diagnoses of the problems made were also followed by the prescription of solutions for the diagnosed problems. I shall briefly summarize these diagnoses as follows.

The first thesis explaining the political crises of Ethiopia is a class oppression thesis. The thesis views the problems of the Ethiopian masses—wherever they might be located—as emanating from the oppression of the peasantry and those other classes exploited by the ruling/feudal/semi-bourgeoisie class. This latter class is composed variously by the nobility, the aristocracy, the privileged soldier-settlers in the southern part of the country, and other landlords. Although the oppressor class was not ethnically defined (nor was it an ethnic-exclusionary group), the point put forth was that a "state-related" oppressor class did evolve, especially in the south.³ The proponents of this view, mostly originating from the student Marxists, including the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP),

³ Getachew A. Woldemariam, *The Constitutional Right to Self-Determination as a Response to the "Question of Nationalities" in Ethiopia* 25.1 International Journal on Minority and Group Rights 1, 31-32 (2018).

argued that ethnic and regional irredentism by ethnic nationalists was an expression of local resentment toward the economic exploitation and political autocracy imposed by the imperial regime.⁴ We need to be reminded in this connection that the military government (Derg) which subscribed to Marxism-Leninism also stated that “ethnic contradictions have no objective existence once class contradictions are resolved.”⁵

The second explanation for the country's political problem depicts it as a problem of colonial relation between the Ethiopian state on the one hand, and on the other Eritrea and the southern societies that were incorporated into the state during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. This explanation was first proffered by the Eritreans in the 1960s when, as earlier noted, the Ethio-Eritrean federation was dissolved by Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1962.⁶ This view is also entertained by some Oromo intellectuals associated with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF),⁷ which itself, at least previously, subscribed to this proposition. Members of the Ogaden liberation movement and its ideologues also subscribe to this position.⁸

As an explanation of the state crises of the 20th century, the colonial thesis does not have many proponents other than the ones indicated above. Though I cannot go into the detail here, it is my view as well that one can show its hollowness drawing on abundant socio-historical facts and evidence. This thesis completely denies the centuries of interaction between the Oromos —as conquerors and as conquered; as victors and as losers; as expanding and being pushed back; as

⁴ Christopher Clapham, *Post-war Ethiopia: The Trajectories of Crisis*, 120 *Review of African Political Economy* 181, 182 (2009).

⁵ John Markakis, “Ethnicity and Conflict and the State in the Horn of Africa” in K. Fukui and J. Markakis (eds.), *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa* 217, 235 (1994).

⁶ Merera Gudina, *Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quest for Democracy, 1960–2000* 100 (2003).

⁷ See, eg., Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868–1992* (1993); Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* (1993).

⁸ Teshale Tibebu, *Modernity, Eurocentrism, and Radical Politics in Ethiopia, 1961–1991*, 6.4 *African Identities* 345, 347 (2008).

traversing the whole country including the present-day Eritrea—and other linguistic communities of Ethiopia in war, in peace, and in trade, because of other manmade calamities and natural disasters. As Professor Clapham averred, this claim can be dismissed as “ridiculous.”⁹

The third thesis explaining the 20th century state crises of Ethiopia is what we can call the “power and resource inequity thesis.” The state power that seems to be held in the cultural and religious overtures of the Amhara has neglected other nationalities, leading them to believe that there is an ethnic dimension to the political exclusion.¹⁰ As Clapham observes, this view understands that although the Ethiopian system of rule and power in practicality functioned in an inegalitarian manner, “it carried no ‘premise of inequality.’”¹¹

The fourth explanation of the state crises is the national oppression claim. This claim singles out the Amhara as the oppressor group and the other nationalities as the oppressed. This thesis accuses the Amhara of promoting its culture and language at the expense of all other cultures and languages. It is held here that, as a result of the identification of the Ethiopian state with the Amhara, all other groups were required and forced to assimilate into the Amhara cultural ethos in order to be recognized as Ethiopians. The most outspoken of the proponents of this position, the TPLF, maintains that the “Shewa” Amhara have exercised a monopoly over political and economic power in Ethiopia during the past century to the exclusion of all other groups.¹²

The TPLF and other ethnic-based movements that emerged in the early 1970s sprang from among the student revolutionaries who, during the second half of the 1960s, had embraced leftist political orientations. As Professor Bahru (2014) observes, the issue of nationalities had been discussed by sections of the student

⁹ Christopher Clapham, *Rewriting the Ethiopian History*, 18 *Annals de’Ethiopie* 37, 50 (2002).

¹⁰ Markakis, *supra* note 5.

¹¹ Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* 22 (1988).

¹² See interview by Paul B. Hanze with Meles Zenawi (1990),

<https://tassew.wordpress.com/2012/06/17/meles-zenawis-interview-with-paul-henze-1990/>

revolutionaries from around 1967, in connection with skirmishes between students on the basis of regional origin, such as between Eritreans and non-Eritreans. Randi R. Balsvik (2005) also notes that the national question was discussed among the Ethiopian student organizations in America and Europe before the famed piece by Walleign Mekonnen on “the question of nationalities in Ethiopia” made its appearance in 1969. As Bahru and Balsvik observe, the interpretation of the sources of Ethiopian social ills became hotly debated among those student revolutionaries who saw the main issues as class problems on the one hand and those who held the view that national oppression was the main culprit on the other.¹³

The sections of the student revolutionaries that held the position that Ethiopia's political, social and economic problems emanated from national oppression maintained that the country's problems could be resolved by dealing with the issue of national oppression.¹⁴ Most of the students that branched out into the various political organizations in the early 1970s, including the TPLF, had already adopted Marxism-Leninism as their governing ideology in the late 1960s.¹⁵ The national oppression thesis was given a cogent intellectual expression by the earlier noted piece entitled “The Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia” presented by Walleign Mekonnen. He opined that the Amhara and, to some extent, the Amhara-Tigre have dominated Ethiopia. According to him, what is considered to be the Ethiopian culture, language, religion, and national dress are all the culture, language, religion, and dress of the Amhara (and to some extent the Amhara-Tigre). It is possible to take issue with what Walleign so confidently asserted. For one, this obviously does not accurately reflect the accommodative approach

¹³ These two positions and other positions advanced by various components of the student revolutionary groups and the party formations that sprang from them will be discussed later in this paper. See Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c. 1960-1974* (2014); Randi Ronning Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1974* (2005).

¹⁴ The two Eritrean movements, the ELF and the EPLF, in fact adopted a different position regarding the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea, namely, that the former colonized the latter and that the struggle therefore was a struggle of decolonization.

¹⁵ Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution, 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (1993).

exercised by the political power—in both social and political spheres—towards all linguistic groups in the country. Second, the association of political power squarely with the Amhara and placing the blame on the Amhara for the policies of the Ethiopian state, which should be viewed separately from the Amhara, misses a lot of points.

In any case, one should note the striking similarity between how Walleign framed his arguments in the piece referred to above (and how these arguments were subsequently developed and practiced by the TPLF), and the Marxist¹⁶ (but more so Leninist and Stalinist) approaches to the question of nationalities. As the studies conducted on the Leninist-Stalinist theory of the question of nationalities show, the theory took a definite shape beginning in 1903 more broadly for the purpose of intensifying the socialist revolution against Tsarist Russia.¹⁷ The theory framed the Russians as oppressor and the various regional and linguistic communities under the Tsarist Empire as oppressed groups. As such, therefore, Lenin and Stalin promised independence to those geographical and linguistic communities under the Tsar in order to garner their support for the Revolution.

Although Lenin endorsed the right of nations to secession, he was against supporting separatist movements in principle. He is often quoted as saying that “the right of divorce is not an invitation for all wives to leave their husbands.”¹⁸ In reality, Marxism-Leninism holds that communism and nationalism are ultimately incompatible. However, Marx and Lenin believed in the necessity of appealing to nationalism in the prerevolutionary period. They condoned the manipulation of the national question to further the revolutionary movements. In fact, the Leninist national policy asserts that “the struggle to overcome nationalism in the

¹⁶ Graham Smith says that classical Marxism had little to say about the national question and offered no advice on the issue of national self-determination (Graham Smith, “Nationalities Policy from Lenin to Gorbachev” in Graham Smith [ed], *The Nationalities Question in the Former Soviet Union* 1, 2 [1990]).

¹⁷ See Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (1984); Smith, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Smith, *supra* note 16.

communist movement is the most important task of Marxist-Leninists.”¹⁹ So the Marxist-Leninist theory holds that nationalism—loyalty to one’s nation or nationality—on the part of the masses is acceptable in a prerevolutionary situation but must give way to proletarian internationalism or socialist patriotism in the aftermath of the revolution.²⁰

Another anomaly about the question of nationalities in Ethiopia is the lack of clarity between three key terminologies: nation, nationality and people. In the Marxist-Leninist discourse, some kind of distinction has been drawn. Thus a “nation” was described as “large,” “historical,” and “great,” linked to peoples of “undoubted vitality” such as Poles, Germans, Italians, and Hungarians. The discourse thus holds that there is no doubt about the right to an independent statehood of such peoples.²¹ Whereas a “nationality” was described as “people in [the] pre-nation stage of development; people who for whatever reason have not yet achieved (and may never achieve) the more august station of nationhood,” it might also refer to a segment of the nation living in another state severed from its kin-nation.²² Nationalities therefore cannot be entitled to independent statehood.

The TPLF, which drove home the idea of the right to self-determination of nations, nationalities, and peoples (NNPs) in Ethiopia, chose to use these terms interchangeably (defining them identically), thus bestowing all elements of the right to self-determination that it constitutionally recognized on each one of them. It is therefore difficult to pin down the notion as adopted by Ethiopian ethno-nationalists because, certainly, it is not articulated in the same way as it is in Marxism-Leninism, as the latter maintained distinctions between the notions. Nor have the Ethiopian ethno-nationalists ever adopted their own definitions of the terms. The constitutional dispensation inherited from the TPLF’s notion of the

¹⁹ Connor *supra* note 17, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12

²² *Ibid.*

question of nationalities at present is that all NNPs are sovereign and each NNP has the right to self-determination, up to and including secession.²³

In fact, the TPLF did not seem to bother about the theoretical or intellectual clarity of these notions. It was singularly interested in the instrumentality of the question of nationalities. As alluded to earlier in the context of the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationalism, what most interested the TPLF was the organizing power of the question of nationalities. As Young, observes, although the number of the Amhara in Tigray had always been negligible, the atmosphere of Amhara cultural dominance was felt in the province through the use of the Amharic language by state functionaries—the police, governors, court personnel, tax collectors, and so on.²⁴ The TPLF carefully theorized about the perceived existence of discriminatory treatment against the Tigrayans carried out by the “Shewan Amhara” elite. Again, Young correctly observes that the ideology of the TPLF was not formed on the basis of any ethnic nationalism prevalent among the Tigrayans; rather, it was culled from the Leninist-Stalinist theory of nationalism embraced by the Ethiopian Student Movement in which the TPLF’s founders were active participants.²⁵

It is necessary to note here the position on the question of nationalities of the other political organizations that emanated from student revolutionaries. The major ones were the EPRP and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM, better known by its Amharic acronym መኢሶን (*Me’ison*)). During the early 1970s, both the EPRP and AESM were inclined to endorse the right to self-determination of nations and nationalities, including secession. For example, in its program of March 1975, the AESM stated bluntly that “the right of nationalities to self-determination up to and including secession is recognized.”²⁶ These parties, however, made some revisions in the subsequent years. In this regard, the EPRP was seen to have focused more on the issue of class struggle in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism as

²³ Arts 8 and 39, Constitution of Ethiopia (1995).

²⁴ John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People’s Liberation Front, 1975–1991* 31 (1997).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32

²⁶ Clapham, *supra* note 11, 198.

the solution to Ethiopia's problems, while the AESM considered federal/regional issues to be central to Ethiopia's political problems.²⁷

2. Analysis of the Socio-historical and Governance Conditions (to-date) of Ethiopia

On the backdrop of the above explanations offered by student revolutionaries, scholars, and political practitioners, I shall attempt to offer an assessment of the socio-historical and governance realities of the country in order to advance my argument that bad governance is primarily responsible for the continued suffering of the Ethiopian public and the multifaceted crises being experienced. Bad governance is here defined by: governments of unlimited power; governments fostering exploitative economic relations; governments lacking accountability and transparency; governments trampling on the rights and freedoms of citizens without any accountability for their violations; and unelected governments or governments elected without meeting the standards of free and fair elections.

Two sets of arguments can be advanced as to why the theory that the Ethiopian political crises of the 20th century emanate chiefly or solely from national oppression cannot be sustained. The first one can be termed socio-historical and cultural, while the second has to do with the nature of the governance system that was established and sustained by the governments in question.

It is an established fact that there has been social discrimination against certain groups in society on different grounds. These discriminatory treatments are widespread throughout the country regardless of cultural or religious differences. A ready example is the discriminatory treatment in the north of the artisans (including the *felasha* [*Beta Israel/Ethiopian Jews*]). These people were not allowed to mix with so-called Abyssinians by intermarriage or in other social

²⁷ Andargachew, *supra* note 15, 139.

forms. Nor were they allowed to own land in any form.²⁸ The northern peasantry included both tenants (‘ጭሰኛ/ *česañā*’ in Amharic) and landowning peasants.

The tenant-landlord relationship was not unique to the southern part of the country—which was placed under the central administration in the early 20th century—although there were some important differences between the north and the south. One such difference being that in the north not all peasants were tenants, while the bulk of the southern peasants were tenants. Whether landowners or not, peasants in both north and south were ገባር (gabāre)—tribute-paying units—to the overlords, such as the nobility.

Areas that resisted Menelik II’s expansion to the south, such as Arusi, Wolayta, Gurage, Keffa, Harer, and partly Benishangul, were treated differently from those that submitted without military confrontation, such as Jima and Wollega. In the former case, state-sponsored soldiers were implanted in the areas as part of the effort to sustain state authority. These soldiers had to be garrisoned after the conquest in order to maintain state authority. The “implanted” soldier-settlers (known commonly as ነፍጠኛ/*nafeṭañā* in Amharic) were transformed into a privileged hereditary class.²⁹ This gave rise to a new social relation between the local people and the new privileged class. They and the ባላባት/*bālābāte* (local nobility) were assigned ገባሮች (*gabāročē*) (local farmers) who provided them with determined amounts of services and produce. Lands that were not cultivated until the conquest became in principle “Emperor’s lands” and were sold to buyers principally from the north. Settlers on these latter lands were not owners of the lands as in the previous case, but tenants who worked on the lords’ lands.³⁰

Another social fact to note is negative stereotypes. Such stereotyping was mutual. Regional and cultural symbolism and stereotypical depiction were common but there seems to be an agreement that the northern aristocrats in charge of the

²⁸ Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest, Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* 65 (1996).

²⁹ Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia 1844–1913* 192 (1975).

³⁰ Donald Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the new Ethiopian empire: themes in social history,” in Donald Donham and Wendy James (eds.), *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology* 3, 41 (1986).

southern conquest were characterized as considering themselves to be more dignified than all other groups, north and south. By viewing them from the northern cultural perspective, the northern aristocrats considered the people of the new south as uncivilized and hawkish.³¹ However, as time went by, social assimilation continued through increased interaction. Although most aristocrats and landowners were those that came with the accompanying state machinery, the view that there was a coincidence between class and ethnic origin in the south would be misleading. For one, the ruling aristocracy was made up of different groups of Amhara, Oromo, Gurage, Tigre and others who displayed the culture and religion of the imperial state. One should also note that there were many wealthy and powerful locals, and poor and helpless settlers at the same time.

As earlier noted, in the parts of the west and southwest (Nekemt, Kelem, Benishangul, Jimma, Gubba) and the east (Aussa) that recognized the imperial state willingly, power decentralization akin to that of the older times was allowed to continue. They were made tributaries and retained their autonomy and local rulers. In these provinces, there were no imperial settler-soldiers (ገፍጠኛ/ *nafetāñā*) or imperial governors. The hereditary chiefs or governors in place were allowed to continue in return for their tribute payments, with their power to impose taxes and all other administrative and judicial decisions remaining intact.³² This arrangement was held until it was ended by Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1932, foreshadowing his zeal for the centralization of power that was to follow.

The third relationship concerns what can rather be termed as a “non-relationship” between the state and the lowland inhabited by the pastoralists and hunters-gatherers. These are made up of the mostly Muslim population of Somali, Afar, and, partially, Oromo people, along with those inhabiting the southwestern and western lowlands bordering the Sudan and the present South Sudan. The failures of the imperial state were most starkly shown in its relation to these people, as it generally remained much less engaged with them. The lack of the state’s presence in these areas had kept the interaction between the state (and its bureaucratic

³¹ Marcus, *supra* note 29, 193.

³² Allesandro Triulzi, “Nekemte and Addis Abeba: Dilemmas of Provincial Rule,” in Donham and James (eds.), *supra* note 30, 51, 58.

apparatus) and the lowland population at a minimum level until some symbolic changes came after 1974. Although most of the time these people generally accepted their positions as tributaries, they reacted dramatically when they were able to do so, as they did under Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim (አሕመድ ግራኝ - 'ahemade gerāñe) in the 16th century.

Writing about the situation of peasants in northern and central Ethiopia during the Middle Ages, Richard Pankhurst observes that the peasants are grievously exploited by the lords, so much so that they had no incentives to produce.³³ Furthermore, they received added misery from soldiers who plundered the homes and fields of the peasantry; they were additionally responsible for providing food and shelter to soldiers and other passers-by. The abusive treatment the peasants received at the hands of the soldiers and the travelling lords who would come with extensive entourages would leave the peasant feeling demoralized and dishonored. Credible historiographical sources document that, throughout the Middle Ages, even before the Christian kingdom's major confrontation with emirs of Adal and the expansionist movement of the Oromo clans, there had been constant conflict in the different parts of the country.³⁴ This phenomenon, its destructive effects aside, no doubt has contributed to the intermixture of the various communities of Ethiopia. This situation of war and conflict continued, and with it the misery of the peasants due to these exactions well into the second half of the 19th century.

In this connection, Levine says that at least for the last two millennia the various linguistic communities inhabiting Ethiopia today have been in more or less constant interaction through trade, warfare, religious activities, migration, intermarriage, and exchange of special services.³⁵ People of diverse origins and backgrounds crisscrossed "Greater Ethiopia" and met, interacted and traded for centuries, not only in numerous sub-regional markets but also in the larger regional markets such as Aksum (in the north), Harar (in the southeast), Gonder

³³ Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II* 9 (1992).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-ethnic Society* 29-32 (1974).

(in the northwest), and Bonga (in the southwest).³⁶ Drawing on historical evidence, Levine aptly characterizes the formation of modern Ethiopia in the late 19th century as “an ingathering of peoples with deep historical affinities.”³⁷

It is well documented that Emperor Haile Selassie came with progressive plans to open up the country to modern education, modernize the economy, and improve its international relations.³⁸ This began with the enactment of the 1931 Constitution on the first anniversary of his coronation. But at the same time, he was predisposed to centralizing power in his hands. He was not happy with the semi-autonomous nature of the regional governors who were in charge of their small armies. He abolished hereditary noblemanship and centralized security and the armed forces.³⁹ After the restoration of his administration in 1941 following the defeat of Italy, he continued the centralization drive more vigorously. The 1942 Decree on provincial governments brought a fundamental paradigm shift that put an end to centuries-old system of power relations in which regional rulers were masters of their own territories, with only tribute-paying relations to the king of kings at the center.⁴⁰ Regional rulers were deprived of the control of provincial finance and taxes. The Decree made the administrative regions it created directly accountable to the center. It gave the Emperor the power to appoint all governors-general of provinces (ጠቅላይ ግዛት/ *ṭaqelāye gezāte*) and governors/directors for the sub-provinces (አዉራጃ ግዛት/ *'awurājā ā gezāte*) and districts (ወረዳ ግዛት/ *waradā gezāte*) throughout the Empire.

Bit by bit, Emperor Haile Selassie concentrated power in his hands, giving it a more solid constitutional expression in the 1955 Revised Constitution which gave the Emperor undisputed and indisputable executive, legislative, and judicial powers, leading him to single-handedly enact, among others, such ill-advised

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁸ See Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia* (2002); Tekle-Hawariat Tekel-Mariam, *Auto Biography* (in Amharic) (2006).

³⁹ Gebru, *supra* note 28, 18.

⁴⁰ James C.N. Paul and Christopher Clapham, *Ethiopian Constitutional Development: A Sourcebook* 552 (1972).

measures like the dissolution of the Eritrean federation (with Ethiopia) in 1962. The constitutional declaration of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as “the Established Church of the Empire ... supported by the state”⁴¹ also no doubt alienated the Muslim community and followers of other Christian variants all around the country.

Furthermore, with the conviction to mold “one nation” out of the multitudes of ethno-linguistic communities in the country, the imperial regime had taken successive measures that undermined the cultural and linguistic autonomy of the groups. For example, the official or public use of the Tigrigna language for communication as well as in schools even in Tigray and Eritrea were proscribed.⁴² Markakis notes that other indigenous languages (not including Amharic) were not allowed to be “printed, broadcast, or spoken in public functions, and attempts to study the culture and history of other groups were decidedly discouraged.” One could say that the history of autonomous self-rule by the Tigray province had been on the decline from Emperor Menelik’s time. Added to that was the clear lack of development in the Tigray province during the entire reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, lending credence to the idea of ethnicity-based nationalism in that province.

Added to the above measures and decisions by Haile Selassie’s government that undermined the traditional governance system as well as cultural and linguistic self-expressions of the various groups were the increasing bureaucratization, nepotism, and corruption in the imperial government. The ruling oligarchy became heavily engaged in amassing private gains through businesses like import-export trade and other private investments with expatriate business persons while holding office.⁴³ As a result, in the first half of the 1970s, in Kafa, Arsi, Illubabur, Gamo Gofa and other places in the south, the people demonstrated and demanded the removal of the governors-general, citing incompetence, eviction of tenants,

⁴¹ Art 126, 1955 Revised Constitution of Ethiopia.

⁴² Markakis, *supra* note 5, 230.

⁴³ Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* 167-69 (2002).

and embezzlement of public money.⁴⁴ Undoubtedly, there was also an unbalanced and inequitable distribution of schools and other social services, which were disproportionately concentrated in Addis Ababa and Eritrea.⁴⁵

Haile Selassie's government was debased because of the concerted opposition to it by student revolutionaries and other sections of the society. There was unity in portraying what was believed to be the main failures of the imperial administration, chief among which were the authoritarian political culture, exploitative social relations, a lack of democratic representation, and the miserable economic conditions of the peasantry,⁴⁶ most starkly demonstrated by the devastating famine in Wollo province in early 1970s. "Education for children of the poor," "bread for the hungry," "land to the tiller," and "down with monarchical rule" were the popular slogans of the student revolutionaries.⁴⁷ The quest for representative government (አገገዊ መንግስት ይመስረት/*hezēbāwi manegeṣete yemaṣerate*) was loud and clear. The restrictions on ethnic and cultural self-expressions made by the imperial regime were also highlighted by the opposition to the regime.

Soon after its assumption of power, although it took such welcome steps as the redistribution of land to the farmers by nationalizing rural and urban land in 1975, the Derg started to implement sweeping measures that were opposed to freedom and political pluralism. Already by 1976, it declared, through what it called a "program of national democratic revolution," its commitment to the vanguard proletariat party. It stamped out all kinds of dissent and opposition, starting with the "red terror" campaign it waged against generations of students and other educated sections of the country. It made any alternative voice, association, or party illegal. It ruled the country with a litany of proclamations, regulations, circulars, edicts, and orders for 13 years until 1987, when it enacted the PDRE

⁴⁴ Andargachew, *supra* note 15, 46.

⁴⁵ Marcus, *supra* note 43, 165.

⁴⁶ Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* 27 (2009); Assefa Meheretu, *Delegitimization of the Collective Identity of Ethiopianism*, 11.1&2 International Journal of Ethiopian Studies 45, 47 (2017).

⁴⁷ Bahru, *supra* note 13, 153-54; Gebru, *ibid.*

(People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia) Constitution which unequivocally instituted the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) — “guided by Marxism-Leninism” — as the vanguard party of the working people. It also declared the notion of “democratic centralism” and the command political structure as its *modus operandi*. Power was tightly centralized in the hands of Mengistu Haile-Mariam. Only lip-service was paid to demands for the cultural and linguistic rights of the ethno-linguistic communities feeling excluded by the Ethiopian state. The last desperate attempt at decentralization was hollow and far from genuine, as were all other decisions of the regime. Decided by the WPE without grass-roots participation, the autonomous regions created by law (Proclamation No. 14/1987), which divided up the country into twenty-four administrative and five autonomous regions, were not given any meaningful powers.

In the final analysis, through its socialist principle of economic and political centralism, the military government ended up becoming more absolutist than the imperial regime had been. It ruled out political pluralism in favor of a one-party system; it sought to deal with all demands for autonomy and self-rule militarily. Its single important achievement, land redistribution, was rendered nugatory by its policy of multiple taxation on the peasants and forced sale of products to the parastatals. Finally, its northern war, for which young men were forcefully conscripted into the army, alienated the farmers, hastening its downfall. The joint military operations of TPLF and EPLF, coupled with Derg's losses of popularity internally and financial support externally, brought about its ultimate demise in 1991.

The Ethiopian state, although it speaks the Amharic Language and (until Emperor Haile Selassie I) professed Orthodox Christianity, does not represent any one ethno-linguistic group. Again, with Emperor Haile Selassie I as its last monarch, all the preceding ruling classes came to power through military power and the claim to hereditary rulership, such as the Solomonic line (along with, of course, some tactical intelligence in outplaying rivals and convincing followers). The Derg, as is well known, was comprised of junior army officers that came from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds brought together by sheer happenstance

and thereafter stuck together through common purpose, establishing itself as a new ruling class without any pedigree. Neither the “descendants” of the Solomonic line⁴⁸ nor the Derg represents any one ethno-linguistic group. It is my argument therefore that the past Ethiopian governments (representing the Ethiopian state in its political sense) should be distinguished from any one ethno-linguistic group and be judged on its own. They were oppressive and authoritarian. They cannot be taken to be “x” or “y” ethno-linguistic group’s government. Because they were not.

As a further testimony of this, the popular discontent with the imperial as well as Derg’s governments emerged in most places of the country without following any ethnic lines. For example, in 1968, the people of Gojjam (a province in the present-day Amhara region), angered by the imposition of agricultural tax and the bad administration of a Shewan governor (an Amhara from Shewa), staged protests against the imperial regime. The rumour that the government was planning to dissolve of the communal እርስት/ *’eresete* (hereditary) ownership of land in the area was also one of the catalysts of the rebellion.⁴⁹ Likewise, the peasants of Bale (in the present-day Oromia region) rebelled in the 1940s and 60s. The causes were a combination of resentments resulting from the unfair distribution of political and economic resources, land alienation, unfair taxation, and ethnic and religious discrimination.⁵⁰ Similar uprisings occurred in the present day Southern and Sidama states in the 1960s, protesting the serfdom and land alienation imposed by the capitalists associated with the imperial ruling class.⁵¹ In Tigray, there were already rebellions in 1943 because of resentment against the appointment of a non-Tigrean governor and the introduction of Amharic as a medium of communication in all state institutions.⁵² There were also other rebellions in 1958

⁴⁸ Even if we take this as credible story, King Solomon was an Israelite (who never set foot in Ethiopia) and Queen Sheba or Saba was a certain monarch in the 10th century BC. Who would she represent ethnically?

⁴⁹ Gebru, *supra* note 28, 84.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵¹ Charles W. McClellan, “Coffee in Centre-periphery relations: Gedeo in the early twentieth century” in *The Southern Marches* 175; Donald Donham, *supra* note 30, 5.

⁵² Gebru, *supra* note 28, 77.

in Wollo (in present-day Amhara region); and in 1947 and 1958 in Hararghe (in present-day Oromia and part of Somali regions).⁵³ These rebellions, which took place in different parts of the country, underscore the overwhelming similarity of the situations of the peasants and the herders in Ethiopian society given that their shared target was the state rather than a particular ethnic group.

It is my view that the above discussion demonstrates that the oppressive mode of governance of the pre-1991 governments and their inability to deliver economically and socially were the main source of the political crises contemporaneously experienced. If this view is correct, it equally means that the national oppression thesis for explaining the 20th century governance crises of the Ethiopian state was erroneous.

3. The Political Solutions Prescribed by the EPRDF and Its Problems

I have noted earlier in this paper that the TPLF was the most ardent proponent of the question of nationalities. Waging a rural-based armed struggle starting from the mid-1970s, the coalition it formed and led—the EPRDF—assumed state power under its leadership in May 1991. At the end of the 1980s, the goal of the TPLF was the restructuring of the Ethiopian state, although earlier it concentrated on liberating the Tigray people from the oppression of what it calls “Shewan Amhara ruling class.”⁵⁴ When it assumed power in May 1991, it, along with the alliance of some other organizations that purported to represent various ethno-linguistic communities of the country, quickly moved to put into effect the legal and institutional structures to realize its political program of the right to self-determination, including secession, for every NNP in the country. This right was recognized in the 1991 Transitional Period Charter. As noted earlier in this paper, the 1995 Constitution also entrenched the various elements of this right more strongly. The Constitution created nine states as members of the federation but

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁴ See Aregawi Berhe, “A Political History of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, ideology and mobilisation in Ethiopia” (PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam 2008).

left the door open for any NNP to request for its own federating state unit.⁵⁵ In fact, over the last two years, two additional states—the Sidama state and the South West Ethiopia People's state—broke away from the multi-ethnic Southern NNPs state, making the number of states 11.

Now, the million-dollar question is whether the social and political problems of the Ethiopian NNPs been resolved by the constitutionally entrenched self-determination rights and the institutional structures created by the TPLF-EPRDF. The state of reality of the country at the present time would definitely answer this question in the negative. The federal government has been at war with the TPLF for close to two years now. It has also been waging a low-intensity military campaign against the OLA-Shene (Oromo Liberation Army) since late 2018. Thousands have been displaced from Oromia region because of the latter conflict. Massive ethnic-based displacements have taken place between Oromia and Somali regions in 2017, and between Oromia and the Southern region in 2018. These have been happening in the Benishangul-Gumuz region with near regularity. People who have been rendered “not persons of the soil” because of ethnic territorialization have been relegated to second-class citizenship in the regions or sub-regional units in which they reside, for decades now. Political organizations, other than those in the ruling coalitions—EPRDF and allied parties previously and the Prosperity Party since 2019—who purport to represent titular groups, including the major ones like the Oromo, Amhara, Somali, Tigre, Sidama, Afar, Wolayta, Gedeo, and others have never stopped pointing out that all is not well with the rights of their respective peoples and the overall democratic governance of the country.

Seven elections took place during the tenure of the EPRDF: 1992 (regional council election during the transitional period); 1994 (for the Constituent Assembly to ratify the Constitution); 1995 (first general elections under the Constitution); and the four subsequent general elections of 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015. One (delayed) general election took place in 2021 under the tenure of the PP. Objective assessments of all the EPRDF's elections documented that none of the elections

⁵⁵ Art 47, the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia.

came close to meeting the minimum international standards of free and fair elections. Although the 2021 general elections represent a major departure from the previous ones, holistic assessment based on election cycles will no doubt give it a fail mark from the viewpoint of democratic electoral standards.

Three decades after the right to self-determination and the ethno-linguistic-based federal arrangement have been rolled out as a panacea for, among others things, the political ills that plagued the Ethiopian body politic, most of the political problems of the mid-20th century remain unaddressed while, as noted shortly above, more problems have been added on top of them. My contention is that the political and legal solutions designed by the TPLF-EPRDF were results of wrong diagnosis of the real political problems of the country. The legal-institutional structures, including the 1995 Constitution, that have been put in place by the TPLF-EPRDF were not properly designed. The principles and rules of the Constitution have not been carefully and objectively designed to serve as bulwarks against manipulation by big or small ethno-linguistic groups, unilaterally or in a cliquish maneuver. Similarly, institutions that serve as enablers of inclusive democratic governance for ethno-linguistically divided societies like Ethiopia's were not comprehensively put in place. At the same time, the Constitution contains near-utopian declarations, like the right of every NNP to found its own state within the federation, which, owing to their impracticality, have become sources of conflict.

Major issues, such as executive power-sharing at national and subnational levels and the effective participation of the NNPs in other national and subnational bureaucratic and governmental economic institutions, have been ignored. "In reality, what [the] constitutional design has done (and continues to do) is to put the fate of the bulk of the [ethno-linguistic communities] in charge of one or two or a few [NNPs] who control the balance of power at a given time."⁵⁶ This seems to lend credence to comments to the effect that the whole ethnic federal self-determination scheme of the post-1991 period was put in place by the TPLF as

⁵⁶ Getachew A. Woldemariam, "Constitutional Protection of Human and Minority Rights in Ethiopia: Myth v. Reality" 82 (PhD Thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2014).

mere “divide and rule” tactic. This seems now inherited by the Oromo political elites that have controlled the reins of power since April 2018.

Conclusion and Implications

I believe the facts and arguments presented above can show that the legal, political, and institutional solutions put in place by the TPLF-EPRDF—against the backdrop of its diagnosis of Ethiopia’s political problems as emanating from national oppression—have failed to fix most of the problems while generating new types of problems. Hence my argument that inappropriate institutional design and a democracy deficit have been the real problems. The unfounded “national oppression” thesis that guided TPLF-EPRDF’s institutional design has taken our attention away from the real problem: the inability to install a representative democratic government answerable to the people. This, therefore, calls for an honest assessment of the problems and the taking of appropriate measures, which include renegotiating the relevant parts of the constitutional design.

The first important step that needs to be taken is to ensure the existence of genuine democratic dispensation whereby citizens and political organizations can freely take part in the political life of their country, advancing their preferences and viewpoints. This, in my view, is the key to fixing all other problems. As part of the democratic exercise, all political actors should engage in a genuine dialogue to identify the problems and come to consensus on how to resolve them.

As I noted earlier, some of the outstanding problems cannot be fixed without the redesign of the relevant parts of the Ethiopian Constitution. Constitutional provisions and institutions that ensure equal citizenship of all Ethiopians at every corner of the country need to be defined in the Constitution. Furthermore, I believe that the need for putting in place appropriate ways by which the democratically mandated representatives of the ethno-linguistic communities and other ideologically-based political parties equitably share in the executive power at the national and subnational levels cannot be overemphasized. The same holds true for equitable representation of the ethno-linguistic communities in other

national and subnational bureaucratic and governmental economic institutions. The army and the security apparatus cannot be left out as well.

When doing this, instructive examples from well-functioning federal systems, such as Belgium, Switzerland, India, and Nigeria, could be assessed. In particular, I find the Nigerian “Federal Character Commission” very relevant for dealing with the equitable representation deficit of the current Ethiopian arrangement.

As is well known, there are more than 300 ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria, including the Hausa Fulani, Ibo, and Yoruba, the three major groups.⁵⁷ The Nigerian Constitution provides for state and local balance in the appointment of government officials by proscribing predominance of persons from any few states or any few ethnic or other sectional groups in the society.⁵⁸ The Nigerian Federal Character Commission is an institution established by the Nigerian Constitution to realize this constitutional policy. Rutimi Suberu observes that the federal character principle is “[t]he most innovative and remarkable feature” of Nigerian federalism.⁵⁹ Suberu further notes:

Indeed, the federal character principle has spawned a vast repertoire of more or less informal consociational practices that are designed to distribute, balance and rotate key political offices among the country’s states, ethnicities, religious groups, regions and other cultural or geographical constituencies, including the six quasi-official geo-political zones (northwest, northeast, and middle-belt in the north, and southwest, southeast, and Niger delta or south-south in the south).⁶⁰

⁵⁷ See Allswell Osini Muzan, “The Nigerian Constitution and Minority Rights Guarantees” in D. A. Guobadia and A. O. Adekunle (eds.), *Ethnicity and National Integration in Nigeria: Recurrent Themes* 213 (2004).

⁵⁸ Arts 14(3)-(4), Nigerian Constitution (1999).

⁵⁹ Rutimi Suberu, *The Nigerian federal system: performance, problems and prospects* 28.4 *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 459, 465 (2010).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 466.

The Federal Character Commission is empowered to implement the federal character principle by, among other things, working out an equitable formula, subject to the approval of the national assembly, for the distribution of all cadres of posts in the public service of the federation and of the states; the armed forces of the federation; the Nigerian police force; and other government security agencies, government-owned companies, and parastatals of the states. It also is charged with the responsibility to promote, monitor, and enforce compliance with the principles of proportional sharing of all bureaucratic, economic, media, and political posts at all levels of government. Moreover, it has the power to take legal measures, including the prosecution of the head or staff of any ministry or government body or agency which fails to comply with any federal character principle or formula prescribed or adopted by it. The Commission is also empowered to ensure that every public company or corporation reflects the federal character in the appointments of its directors and senior management staff, regardless of any contrary stipulation in other laws. The design of an institution along these lines can go a long way in curbing the arbitrariness prevalent in Ethiopia regarding equitable representation.

Electoral system redesign is another matter that needs attention. True, the plurality variant of the majoritarian electoral system in place for parliamentary elections in Ethiopia has not been genuinely practiced. In that regard, the problems with past elections have not been linked to the electoral formula. But, given the ethno-linguistic and other political diversity extant in the country, an appropriate variant of a proportional representation electoral system or a hybrid one is believed to suit Ethiopia better.⁶¹ Deliberation and agreement by the major political actors on a more suitable electoral formula must be made.

Strengthening the institutional structure for the protection of human and minority rights must also be prioritized. I believe several gaps exist in the current constitutional dispensation in this regard, but I point out just two here. The first

⁶¹ See, eg., Arend Lijphart, *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies* 15.2 *Journal of Democracy* 96 (2004); Andrew Reynolds et al., *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook* (2005), ESD_del1 (anfrel.org)

is the need for the incorporation of the notion of “federal paramountcy” in the Constitution, which is now missing. The constitutions of the US, Switzerland, Russia, and Germany all specifically incorporate the principle of the paramountcy of federal laws over state laws either in relation specifically to rights or in all cases.⁶² This principle I believe is necessary, among others, to make sure that all Ethiopian citizens and people enjoy comparable rights and quality of life. The second important principle that needs to be included in the federal Constitution is an explicit provision that prohibits states from granting any discriminatory treatment or preference to any of their citizens on any grounds, such as ethnicity, or place of origin, or any other status, nor restricting or abridging their rights or privileges on such grounds.

The need to revisit the constitutional review system put in place in the current constitutional arrangement in Ethiopia has been stressed by many commentators. It is also my view that there is a need to put in place a judicial body that will be guided by judicial independence principles and become an impartial and competent arbiter of constitutional disputes. It can be fashioned like the constitutional court prototypes or even to resemble the French *Council Constitutionnel*, with the adaptations and nuances that will need to be added.

The final implication I want to draw from the main claim made in this paper is the need to redesign the parliament of the federal government. As it is one of the basic structures of federal arrangements, the parliament must be bicameral, having two legislative chambers. This should be done by redefining the mechanisms for constituting the House of Federation, which will no longer have a constitutional review power as per the suggestion made earlier. As in other federations that are well functioning, the upper house could be designed in such a way that it protects the interests of the federating units of the federation at the federal level and takes part in other shared-rule responsibilities.

⁶² See, eg, United States Constitution, art 6; Swiss Constitution, art 49; German Constitution, art 31; Russian Constitution.

DISCUSSIONS

Dr. Sisay Alemahu - Discussant

I think this is a very good historical analysis of the problem of what we call state building within the Ethiopian constitutional and political architecture. I will raise one general question which I take issue with, which is the genesis of the nationality question which, not only in your paper (you don't say it directly, but implicitly) but also in other writings, often is considered to have emanated from the Students' Movement. I do not think that is an accurate diagnosis of the question of nationality in the history of Ethiopia. At least the Oromo national or ethnic political movement emerged way before the Students' Movement—during the Mecha and Tulama Association—and what happened within the imperial dynasty's unease with the whole idea of ethnic-based organizations, whatever form they took. I recommend **ግዛት እና ግዛት** (*gezete 'enā gezote*), a very insightful book on the evolution of the Mecha and Tulama Association and how it evolved to what we now call OLF.

If you look at it at all from the Oromo political movement perspective, during the Students' Movement what actually happened was a bifurcation in the way the political question has been articulated. People like Haile Fida joined All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (commonly known by its native Amharic acronym **መኪሶን**/*Me'ison*), considering it more of class struggle issue, whereas the Baro Tumsas, which reignited the Oromo ethno-political movement joined **እጭኣት** (*'Ecāte*) (an Amharic acronym for "Ethiopian Oppressed People's Revolutionary Struggle," a communist organization in Ethiopia) and later into ethnic political mobilization. So at least from the perspective of the Oromo political struggle, it would be remis to conclude that the question of nationality and ethnic politics emanated from the Students' Movement.

The other point I will raise is: in your diagnosis you try your best to show with evidence that the question was not really a national oppression question but rather

one of bad governance. I would like to present some challenge to this line of assertion. In your own presentation articulating the inegalitarian thesis, you basically indicate that there was a feeling of exclusion among the ethnic lines. You also vividly and repeatedly show us that there has been cultural and religious suppression. I think it is integral part of the nationality question that cultural, religious, and linguistic oppression and marginalization happened in the history of the Ethiopia state. So, even the examples that you referred to support your argument that there were more movements based on socio-economic and political marginalization. There was always ethnic aspect to it. If we take the Bale Movement, there was a feeling of ethnic and political marginalization. And there is also the case of the 1943 Tigray uprising you mentioned. In all these examples there is this ethnic element.

On top of that, we have the politics of historical resonance, by which I mean that the way the political question is articulated resonates with the lived reality of the large population of the country. I can give you my own experience coming from a small village town in western Hararghe 700km from Addis Ababa. I lived and grew up in a community 99.9% Oromifa speaking Muslim population. Since my parents were businessmen, I had the privilege of knowing who the governors and the judges of that small village town were. The administrators and governors always came from the center, Amharic speaking governors and judges delivering administrative and judicial services in Amharic to a population that didn't speak Amharic. So, the political articulation of this problem in 1991 really resonates very well with the community that has experienced that situation. In that sense, as far as the population understood the political question, the problem resonates with the lived experience of that community; I think that is what matters more than how the problem is articulated in political science or by historians.

Finally, from the way you challenged the diagnosis of the Ethiopian body politic as not one of ethnic oppression but bad governance, I expected that your conclusion will somehow propose a sort of paradigm shift in the way the constitutional architecture should be framed, maybe moving to citizenship politics, but in your recommendations what you propose pertains to the

ethnolinguistic composition of state authorities and structures including the military, a Federal Character Commission adapted from Nigeria's federal system, and also a revamped role for the HoF. So, to me you basically proposed some fixes to the existing ethno-linguistic federation problem rather than proposing a new alternative, since according to your proposition the existing system was based on wrong diagnosis of the Ethiopian political problem.

Dr. Mulugeta Mengist

Dr. Getachew raised the instrumentalization of the nationality question in the Ethiopian body politic. I myself look at the nationality question or the concept of nations and nationalities in terms of its function as an instrument of public administration. It is not only a matter of cultural or linguistic self-expression; it is a matter of governance being rooted in public consciousness, which is formed as a result of common culture, language and history. I am often reminded of Nicolo Machiavelli's advice to the Prince, in which he stated that, while it is "better to be feared than loved," being feared has a limit since you cannot squander your force. Machiavelli further advises: "if you can secure something by deceiving people, don't dare to take it by force." So, public administration should be rooted in the common consciousness of the people. For me it is a matter of having an effective public administration that public administration should be rooted in cultural and linguistic identities. For me, the origin and the meaning of the term "nations and nationalities" doesn't matter; the question is whether it has a function in our modern public administration.

Dr. Zelalem M. Teferra

I have a quick question to Dr. Getachew: you proposed that the solution to problems ailing Ethiopia is to have an inclusive democratic governance system. Yes, Ethiopia has tried all forms of government, whether aristocracy, military dictatorship, imperial regime, and the one thing that we have not tried is a democratic governance system. But even for a democracy to take root I think there must be some conditions which should be fulfilled. For example, in poor countries where we do not have a developed society, it is very difficult to have democracy.

So, when you propose inclusive democratic governance, do you really think that we have the conditions required to implant democracy? I just wanted you to reflect on this idea. I still doubt if democracy alone can solve Ethiopia's core problems.

Reply: *Dr. Getachew Assefa*

The point I was trying to make in discussing the national question was this: yes, there were these problems, raised by Sisay Alemahu, including the prohibition of cultural and linguistic self-expressions and other problems that were felt by different ethnolinguistic communities, but all these problems stem from the undemocratic nature of the governance system in this country. In other words, it is not a situation where a certain ethnic group imposing restrictions on cultural and linguistic self-expression of other ethnic groups, but one where the state failed to design proper policies, laws, and systems to account for the interests of the various ethnic communities, including language self-expression and cultural expression. For me, that is where the problem comes from; so, if we have a democratic governance that caters to the different interests, we do not need to talk about the national oppression issue.

To address the problem, I recommended inclusive approach because, in my view, we cannot implant democratic governance in Ethiopia without taking into account the interests of the different ethnolinguistic communities. The governance system cannot be purely citizen-based; I do not think it will work. We must think about a consociational power sharing arrangement that is meticulously designed, not arbitrary like what we see when one ethnocracy replaces another, a result of the absence of a design that prevents this from happening. So, I think having the right policy and legal regime which takes into account the interests of the various ethnolinguistic communities on an equitable basis is a government problem, not a problem one ethnic group created.

Regarding the conditionality issue to implant democracy, there are democracy theorists who argue for and against the prerequisites. I think the idea that we must wait until a middle class is created for us to practice democracy is problematic.

