

# **Breaking the Dialectics of Political Unsettling in Ethiopia\***

*Dr. Semir Yusuf*

## **Abstract**

Ethiopia's political climate has long suffered from recurrent political unsettling. More often than not, political unsettling has been punctuated by the deep ethnic divisions and contentious nationalist mobilizations prevalent in the country. My presentation will delve into factors that perpetuate political violence in Ethiopia and ask what national dialogue could offer in our efforts to transcend these factors. Negating state-centered and society-based explanations for the persistence of contentious nationalisms, I will develop a dynamic model that considers the dialectical relationship between state agents and societal actors in producing undesirable political outcomes. Such an argument helps accord agency to all relevant forces, highlights the paradox of state policies having unintended and unexpected political consequences, and points to a more fundamental predicament that needs to be addressed to make progress toward a political settlement. I will then underscore the need for forging a new social contract through national dialogue, addressing questions around the optimal constitutional designs for managing diversity, on the one hand and re-ordering state-society relations in ways that tackle the democratic deficit in the country on the other.

## **Introduction**

I think it is time to talk about the development of ethnic division in Ethiopia and the need to forge a new social contract through an inclusive, participatory national

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\* This chapter is based on a transcript of Dr. Semir Yusuf's speech at the conference and not a submitted paper or essay. Whereas the editors have endeavored to stay close to the essence and tone of the original speech, it is worth noting that a process of transcription, copyediting and editing has gone into the process.

dialogue process. In this speech, I will discuss the dialectics of political unsettlement in Ethiopia through the problematic of ethnic division and the role of national dialogue in forging a new social contract in terms of transcending that political unsettlement. By “political unsettlement,” an expression I borrowed from a recent publication by Jan Pospisil,<sup>1</sup> I mean the kind of political environment where actors negotiate and interact violently; basically, a politically unstable general climate. Ethiopia has suffered from recurrent political unsettlement, which has been punctuated by contentious nationalisms and ethnic division, with significant implications for the welfare of human lives.

In this presentation I will be addressing two questions. First, what explains this perennial problem in Ethiopia around ethnic division? Second, what role can national dialogue play in terms of effectively managing our persistent ethnic divisions?

## **1. A Dialectical Approach to Understanding Ethiopia's Recurrent Political Unsettlement**

There could be a number of explanations for the persistence of ethnic fragmentation in Ethiopia. I would like to build my own analysis on rampant explanations often provided by two contending blocks in Ethiopian politics. On the one hand we have the so-called pan-Ethiopian nationalist perspective propounded by many Ethiopians who argue, among other things, that the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) is the organ most responsible for the persistence of ethnic fragmentation in Ethiopia. The argument here is that the EPRDF, or Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on top of it, institutionalized ethnicity and in doing so solidified or froze ethnic identities, leading to ethnic fragmentation and posing the risk of state failure as some fear today. Here, much attention is focused on the EPRDF and what it did to society.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Pospisil, *Peace in Political Unsettlement: Beyond Solving Conflict* (2019).

There is another explanation contrary to the one described above, usually propounded by some ethnonationalist elites. And the argument here is that ethnonationalist struggle had started before the EPRDF was constituted. More importantly for them what has maintained the ethnonationalist dream are anti-state societal forces more than EPRDF itself, in the sense that the nationalist armed groups, oppositional media, CSOs, and opposition political parties have all played a very important role in continuously promoting and propelling ethnonationalist struggles. By doing this, they have kept the ethnic dream alive, pushing ethnic agendas in the country. Hence, much of the explanation here is credited to societal forces.

These two explanations start from different planes. The first explanation is state-centric; it is basically about EPRDF and what it did to the society as the state agent. And the other explanation focuses on social forces: non-state armed and civilian entities and their roles in maintaining the ethnic struggle and vision against all odds. These are contending explanations about the persistence of ethnic division in Ethiopia. I believe that these explanations are defective; they do not help us understand the complete picture of what has happened in this country in the last couple of decades. So, I would like to develop a dynamic model, anchored on the dialectical relationship between state and society, the cycle of interaction between the two, to explain the persistence of ethnic division in Ethiopia.

Why is a dialectical explanation important? I believe it is important for three reasons, the first of which is that it accords agency to all relevant actors in our country, instead of, for instance, rendering the state as the most important agent in the entire production and reproduction of ethnic divisions, and so rendering society as a helpless passive reactive factor in the entire dynamic.

The second significance is that the dialectical approach also helps us to highlight the paradox of state policies: They bring about unintended consequences, which in this case describes successive regimes in Ethiopia that tried to wipe out ethnonationalist struggle to control the ethnic dream, but in the process actually contributed to the amplification and acceleration of ethnonationalist struggles.

The third significance of the dialectical approach lies in helping us to locate the most fundamental predicament in our society that perpetuates the cycle of instability and political violence through persisting contentious nationalist mobilization and ethnic division in Ethiopia.

So, what does this fateful dialectical state and society relationship look like? It has two flanks. The first is the repressive flank. The second is the partial accommodation flank. Sometimes ethnonationalist movements challenge the state or successive regimes in Ethiopia and the regimes responded through repressive means, and that contributes not to the dampening of ethnonationalist struggles but to the further acceleration of the tension between societal actors and state agents (that is the repressive angle).

Yet authoritarian governments do not always rely on repression alone. They also try to legitimize their rule through partial accommodation. The interesting thing is that, even when ethnonationalists are partially accommodated into state structures and the body politic, they use the infrastructures of the party and the state to their own advantage to further propel ethnonationalist struggles. Therefore, the outcome is that this interaction between societal forces and state agents has continued to perpetuate and reproduce ethnic division and fragmentation in Ethiopia. I have examples to illustrate my points. From the repression angle, begging from Emperor Haile Selassie's time, consider how Eritrea was forcefully incorporated into Ethiopia in 1961 and some of the forceful measures taken against the nascent Oromo-centric movements embodied in the Mecha and Tulama Association. Both repressive measures contributed to the solidification, respectively, of Eritrean and Oromo struggles against the Ethiopian state.

During the Derg's period, repression was taken to a whole new level, which included meting out massive and indiscriminate violence measures in Eritrea and in Tigray, which spurred civilians to join armed groups in these two regions, thereby bolstering the TPLF, TLF, ELF, EPLF, etc. In addition, the Derg paradoxically paved the way for the final capture of the state power by

ethnonationalist forces by decimating multiethnic parties like Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (AESM) (better known by its Amharic acronym መኳሪን (*Me'ison*). Thus, the Derg was fighting against the ethnonationalist forces to the extent possible, but after multiethnic parties were extinguished, the only power left to fight for the "Ethiopianist cause" was the Derg; with the destruction of the Derg, ethnonationalist forces represented by TPLF and EPLF very smoothly captured state power in 1991, representing another unintended consequence of state policies against ethnonationalist forces. Thereafter, the EPRDF came in and constructed multinational federalism while at the same time centralizing state power through a hierarchically organized party structure that blocked the aspirations of rising ethnic elites and fueled grievances among several ethnonationalist groups in Ethiopia. Of course, the EPRDF meted out massive repression against several ethnonationalist groups, but this did not contribute to a permanent dampening but rather an accelerated infestation of Ethiopian politics by rising ethnonationalist groups and social movements of different sorts, as we witnessed by 2015. The current administration as well, by singlehandedly leading the transition process and also deploying repressive tactics against opposition forces especially in Oromia, fueled grievances among several ethnonationalist elites. Finally, the civil war, with all its atrocities in different parts of the country, contributed once again to the re-solidification of the Tigrayan identity and their struggle against the center.

So, all of these processes and the examples illustrate an important fact: The repressive tactics of successive regimes, although meant to dampen ethnonationalist struggles, have actually fueled these struggles and contributed to the persistence of ethnic divisions and contentious nationalist mobilizations in Ethiopia.

On the other hand, successive regimes in Ethiopia did not rely solely on suppression; they also partially accommodated ethnic demands and ethnonationalist elites into their party and state structures, and there are several examples to prove this. During the Derg period, the Land to Tiller proclamation was an initial attempt to concede to societal demands and, in part,

ethnonationalist demand as well. The Derg also made use of local languages for official purposes, which basically empowered local languages and cultures in different parts of the country. At the end of the regime it also accepted the idea of autonomous regions, especially in those areas where there was stiff resistance against the center. Again, this was reacting to societal demands and armed struggles; although not implemented, it was one concession made by the state to the ethnonationalists' struggle. The EPRDF established a multinational federal system ostensibly with the aim of accommodating group demands; the current administration as well, after 2018, opened up the highest echelon of state and party structures to cater to marginalized groups in the country.

So, all these were successive attempts to partially accommodate ethnonational demands. But the interesting thing is that even when ethnonationalist elites were partially accommodated into state structures and the body politic, they actually used the infrastructures of the institutions available to them to further propel contentious ethnonationalist struggles. One glaring example to this is what happened in 2015, 2016, and 2017 when Oromo and Amhara social movements in Oromia and Amhara used the structures of Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) to further push ethnonationalist struggles to the point of dislodging TPLF from its hegemony. Hence ethnonationalists pushed the state to concede and when the state conceded partially, they used the infrastructures opened to them to push for further struggles. This contributed again to the perpetuation of ethnic division and ethnonationalist struggle.

What we are witnessing today in Ethiopia in the form ethnic division and fragmentation is the product of the dialectical relationship between state agents and societal forces. It is what the state did to society and society did to the state. It is practically impossible to focus on one and forget the other, to just blame the EPRDF for what happened or to just credit ethnonationalist struggles for maintaining ethnonationalist dreams, a view that is hypothetical and rosy. It is the interaction between these two forces that produced this predicament we are in and

which has continuously produced and reproduced political violence in our society.

## **2. The Role of National Dialogue in Managing Ethiopia's Recurrent Political Unsettling**

Therefore, in my view, the point is to look for a solution that moves away from recurrent political unsettling gradually towards some sort of political settlement that should, in my view, be inclusive and participatory in its approach. We have to move away from the victor's political settlement to a more inclusive and participatory political settlement in forging a new social contract.

What does the new social contract should look like and what are the issues that it should primarily address? First, it should address, through an inclusive participatory political process, the question of constitutional design for Ethiopia: is it consociationalism (corporatist consociationalism, or liberal consociationalism, or a mix of the two) or centripetalism, or could we mix aspects of centripetalism with consociationalism, or can we take some lesson from integration so that it can complement what consociationalism and centripetalism may offer to Ethiopian politics and society? We need to arrive at an optimal institutional design to manage divergent dreams and visions in this country, and that should be done through an inclusive and participatory national dialogue process.

There is a second very important issue that the new social contract should address—state-society relations. It is one thing to arrive at an excellent constitutional design for accommodating nationalist demands, but it is a completely different thing to reorder state-society relations. One factor that bedevils our politics, perpetuating our recurrent political violence, is how the state agents interact with societal forces. In other words, we need to respond to the democracy deficit in our country by, on the one hand, disciplining the Ethiopian state and, on the other, making societal movements and demands orderly and constitutionally determined. So, democratizing state-society relations is at the heart of our problem alongside the question of addressing constitutional design

to reconcile divergent perspectives in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the two issues are not completely isolated from each other; it is very difficult to address Ethiopia's democratic deficit without addressing the national question. On the other hand, it is almost impossible to effectively address the national question without addressing the democratic deficit in this country. So, when we conduct national dialogue to forge a new social contract in this country, we have to realize that we are not at liberty to resolve one thing at a time; we have to try to resolve the two problems at the same time. We have to look for solutions that are co-constitutive rather than contradictory. Accordingly, the policy recommendations we forward to manage the nationalist contradiction should also help us resolve, directly or indirectly, our democratic deficit, and the recommendations we produce to resolve our democratic deficit should contribute toward the resolution of identity-based antagonisms. There is no way to resolve one problem and shelf the other for a while; the two are very much interlinked. Until and unless we find ways and mechanisms of dealing with the two problems at the same time, we will continue with our recurrent political unsettlement and with the very undesirable dialectical relationship between state and society.

## DISCUSSIONS

*Dr. Abdi Jibril*

My question is how do you factor in our political culture, in the sense that power in Ethiopia usually transfers through violence, not through negotiation? How do you see this problem? Opposition political parties seem democratic but once they get to power, I assume they will continue repressing and persecuting others; that is my fear. So, how do you see that cultural factor?



*Dr. Zelalem Mogessie Teferra*

You said that the ethnonationalists' movement has been fueled as a reaction to state suppression. But is it not a two-way street? When the ethnonationalists assume power they suppress the pan-Ethiopianists, and the pan-Ethiopianists respond in their own way, inflaming ethnonationalism. I think that the whole thing should be looked at as an exchange of fire between the two contending blocks and that should also be part of our analysis.

Semir, you also said that when ethnonationalists are accommodated, interestingly, they used state structure to promote ethnonationalist agenda. But given the situation that we have seen in Ethiopia over the last 30 years, rather than accommodation is it not the institutionalization of ethnonationalism that led to inter-ethnic competition? I know many observers say that in 2018 pan-Ethiopianist forces (or as some say, unitarist forces) took over state power from ethnonationalists, but in my assessment, TPLF was toppled by ethnonationalist forces, not by pan-Ethiopianist forces. So, for me it seems that the more you institutionalize ethnonationalism the more you promote intra- and inter-ethnic competition; I think it would be good if you reflect on this.

*Dr. Getachew Assefa Woldemariam*

In my own presentation I was arguing that the national question in Ethiopia is a false question, because the national question, as articulated in the Marxist-Leninist theory, presupposes the existence of an oppressor group, and the oppressor was the government, which does not have ethnic identity. In that sense, how do you see the issue of the national question in Ethiopia? And if we say the national question existed in Ethiopia, which elements of it are not answered at the moment? I ask because the current constitution prides itself on answering all national questions. You said that we have to resolve the democracy deficit and the national question at the same time; so, my question is what national question is there that is unresolved?

**Reply: *Dr. Semir Yusuf***

On the question of our political culture, I agree with you that the political culture that infests our politics is very much inimical to democratic practice and that it has repeatedly undercut any possibility for democratic power transition in this country. While acknowledging this problem, I do not want to overemphasize it, in the sense that—sometimes we tend to assume that we cannot have a democratic state until we completely transform our political culture, but that is not how democracy takes root in society. The countries that we consider today to be paragons of democracy, including those in Europe, were at some point feudal, autocratic, and repressive states; it is through gradual progression of institutional inclusion and compromise that they went on to develop the kind of culture that they have today. So, we should not assume that, because our political culture is feudalistic, exclusivist, and anti-democratic, we are doomed to stay forever where we are now. Second, we have to use national dialogue as a means and as an end. The means part is: It is an educational process by itself if it is done correctly, meaning it is credible, inclusive, and independent. The national dialogue process by itself can help us inculcate a culture of dialogue, and then the outcome could be designed in such a way that this problem of anti-democratic political culture is addressed through the establishment of institutional mechanisms with checks and balances of the state and its interactions with society. So, we should take the national dialogue seriously, if that is at all possible in the current dynamics. Both the process and the end itself can help us overcome the quagmire of anti-democratic culture in this country.

The other interesting question I want to reflect on is the point you made about the institutionalization of ethnonationalist demands; that is, for me, another way of saying accommodation through grand coalition, proportional representation, segmental autonomy, and mutual veto. But the interesting thing in the Ethiopian case is that rebellious movements during the EPRDF's era emerged both inside and outside the institution that EPRDF erected. So, during the social movements (the Qeerro movement, the Fano movement, etc.) what actually happened was that social actors outside the state collaborated with political actors that are

accommodated into the party and state structures in rebellion against the TPLF. So, you see, it is a dialectical relationship between state and society that is perpetuating ethnic divisions in the country.

The other point you raised is the switching of place, that the ethnonationalists suppress pan-Ethiopianists when they assume power and vice versa. But I would like to point out that repressive governments do not discriminate; they oppress anyone rising against them. The Derg repressed ethnonationalists intensely, but it was also fighting against apparent Ethiopian nationalist political groups like Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and multiethnic parties like EPRP and መኪሶን (*Me'ison*). It did not discriminate in that regard, and that contributed to its downfall. The same is true for the EPRDF in its indiscriminate suppression of political groups. The EPRDF repressed and oppressed, not only the Ethiopian nationalists, but also the ethnonationalists. That is why they mobilized their constituencies on the basis of the repression that the state meted out against them to the point where, by 2015 it nearly became impossible for the TPLF to sustain its power. So, the dialectics between state and society propped up once again, whereby state policies meant to dampen ethnonationalist struggles contributed to their acceleration and finally the downfall of those very regimes who were fighting against the ethnonationalist groups.

On the issue of the national question, first and foremost, our acceptance of the existence of national oppression does not, in my view, necessitate accepting the idea that one national group oppressed another national group. There could be discrimination against people on the basis of their identity—ethnicity, religion, or culture—without assuming that a certain national group, like the Amhara for example, oppressed other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. I believe there were identity-based marginalizations in the past in Ethiopia, but I do not assume (and it is factually and morally reprehensible to assume) that the whole body of an ethnic group oppressed other nations and nationalities in Ethiopia. I agree with you that it is the state that did the oppressing and not societal groups or ethnic groups against national groups.

Regarding the remaining national questions: At this time, what are the kinds of things we are still arguing about as Ethiopians to the point of perpetuating the political unsettlement that needs to be resolved? There are many contentious matters: the symbol of the state, the federal structure, and government type. We need to manage these by forging a new social contract through an inclusive and participatory national dialogue process. And we have to eschew this rosy idea that national dialogue can help us resolve all these disagreements in the short run. I believe the short-term effect of the national dialogue will be the forging of institutional mechanisms whereby we can debate on contending issues without resorting to conflict, and this can be capitalized in the long run towards establishing a real political settlement. So, we have to do this gradually in terms of reconciling divergent perspectives in our country.

A final point: It is in the very nature of nationalism that once it kicks off, it does not stop at will; it has this quality of internally reinforcing itself. It starts off as a reaction to repression, it puts out some demands and then it establishes institutions like armed groups, media, opposition parties, funding agencies, etc. That is why we need to sit down and see what kind of things we agree on in the short run and what kind of institutions we can establish for disagreeing without resorting to violence, and in the process reach a new political settlement through a new social contract.