

## The State, Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and Democratisation in Ethiopia

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### Abstract

*Following the change of regime in 1991, Ethiopia has been undergoing a major political metamorphosis, the key elements of which are political pluralism and a decentralisation of power based on ethnic-linguistic criterion. As such, the twin objective of the Ethiopian transition is to effect a dual transition, i.e. a transition 'from an ethnic dominated empire state of unequals to an ethnically egalitarian nation-state of equals and from authoritarian rule to democracy'.*

*The central problem in Ethiopia's democratisation is the contradictory policy of the TPLF/EPRDF regime, which has been democratisation on paper and authoritarianism in practice. Motivated by the propensity to dominate and the imperatives of recreating the Ethiopian state and society according to its own image, the ruling party has been advocating the policy of political pluralism, a liberal national constitution, decentralisation of the state structure to promote self-rule, etc., while in theory concentrating power in the hands of the ruling party. To this end, a strategy of creating the PDOs as instruments of central control has been followed, which have obstructed the various democratisation initiatives. As argued in this paper, the exclusive elections held in June 1992 and 1994, May 1995 and 2000, were all aimed at the institutionalisation of a de facto one-party state and have contributed little, if any, to the democratisation of the Ethiopian state and society.*

*This paper further argues that despite some measures related to political liberalisation, ending of a command economy, etc., the Ethiopian state has generally remained authoritarian and repressive, and in the same way the 'nation-building' project of the imperial regime for much of the 20th century and the 'garrison socialism' of the military regime in 1970s and 1980s failed to produce the desired result, the present attempt to democratise the Ethiopian State and society appears to be foundering, as a result of the continued adherence of the TPLF leadership to what they call 'revolutionary democracy', which is essentially based on Mao's dictum: 'power comes from the barrel of the gun' and the principles of democratic centralism, both of which seem to have a debilitating effect on the democratisation enterprise.*

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## Introduction

Since the 1960s the multi-ethnic empire state of Ethiopia has been experiencing a crisis of major proportions that have provoked two major upheavals in 1974 and 1991. The first revolutionary upheaval ended in the institutionalisation of “barrack socialism”, which opened the way for a bloody military interlude that turned the country to a big prison house for 17 years.

The second upheaval, which came in 1991, has led to yet another major political metamorphosis. Following the regime change, institutions of the old order such as the omnipotent party, the parliament, the military and the civilian bureaucracy, the supportive mass organisations such as the peasant, women, youth as well as the workers associations were all dismantled to give way to the emerging institutions of the new regime. In other words, the Ethiopian state and the institutions of government thereof have been fully reordered in the image of the victorious elite. And in the remaking of the Ethiopian state ethnicity as well as multi-party democracy have become central. Here, in what appears to be a response to the century old ethnic domination, an ethnic-based federal formula has been introduced while political pluralism is expected to end centuries of autocratic rule and a bloody military interlude from 1974 to 1991.

This paper argues that notwithstanding the positive attempts to end ethnic inequality and democratise state and society, as a result of the hegemonic aspiration of the now dominant elite as well as the competing ethnic nationalisms that have obstructed the creation of a broad national consensus, the hoped-for democratic transition seems to be frozen while the federal formula that has been intended to democratise inter-ethnic relations by empowering the hitherto marginalised groups appears to be creating more problems than the ones it seeks to solve. Consequently, Ethiopia has continued to be rocked by ethnically precipitated crisis in much of the country.

## Theoretical Discussion

### *The Elite and Competing Ethnic Nationalisms*

There is an emerging academic consensus that political mobilisation is an essential part of competing ethnic nationalisms and that the role of the elites is central in such mobilisation. Put differently, the role of the elite is critical in synthesising the ideology of nationalism, setting the agenda, organising the nationalist movement and providing the necessary leadership to achieve the set goals. In fact, most studies in this field underline the centrality of the elite in such projects. For instance, they are ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ for Esman (1994) and Eriksen (1993), ‘inventors of nations’ for Gellner (quoted in Hann, 1996: 106) and ‘political gladiators’ for Milazi (1995).

Furthermore, it is generally known that for any nationalist movement a mobilising elite is needed to articulate, appeal as well as inspire the masses in whose name the struggle is to be waged – what Nairn calls ‘to invite the masses into

history' (quoted in Smith, 1986: 137). However, a word of caution is in order here: for the masses to be mobilised and be ready to make the necessary sacrifices for a given cause, there should be separate material or other interests of their own in the cause to be promoted. This implies the possibility of both convergence and divergence of the interests of the elite and the masses in any nationalist enterprise. Moreover, ethnicity and nationalism will arouse stronger popular sentiment and turn into a formidable material force if the interests of the leaders and that of the masses have found a meeting ground. In this regard, another important point to note is that ethnic nationalism, as ideology of political mobilisation, can be used to maintain a given *status quo* in the name of 'state-building' and/or 'nation-building' political ventures in order to defend the political, economic and socio-cultural interests of the dominant elite. It can also be equally used to change the existing *status quo* in favour of the subaltern ethnic groups. In other words, in multi-ethnic societies, an ethnic-based dominant political class can use political mobilisation to ensure the continuity of the structure of dominance and its privileges in the name of such national mottoes as 'nation-building' and 'national unity'. In the same way, marginalised groups can use it to end historical injustice, current exploitative relations and repression as part of popular struggles for the creation of democratic governance. This means that the role of nationalism can be 'state-making', 'state-breaking' (Ayoo, 1996), or serving political interests in the grey area between.

### ***Competing Conceptions of Democracy***

In its simplest form, democracy is generally understood to be, "government of the people, by the people, for the people". But such understanding of democracy has been fraught with difficulties that arise from competing conceptions that run from liberal democracy, which is premised on the primacy of individual rights and free enterprise to socialist democracy, which calls for social justice and economic empowerment of the subaltern classes. For instance, Lipset defines democracy as 'a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office' (quoted in Vanhanen, 1997: 28). Similarly, for Pennock, democracy is a political system in which 'public policies are determined either directly by vote of the electorate or indirectly by officials freely elected at reasonably frequent intervals and by a process in which each voter who chooses to vote counts equally... and in which a plurality is determinative' (quoted in *ibid.*).

On his part, Vanhanen has conceptualised democracy as 'a political system in which different groups are legally entitled to compete for power and in which institutional powerholders are elected by the people and are responsible to the people' (*ibid.*: 31). In this connection, Bratton and Van de Walle (1997), who attempt to link it up with the problematic of transition write:

*democracy is...a form of political regime in which citizens choose, in competitive elections, the occupants of the top political offices of the state. According to this definition, a transition to democracy occurs with the installation of a government chosen on the basis of one competitive election as long as that election is freely and fairly conducted within a matrix of civil liberties, and that all the contestants accept the validity of election results (1997: 12f).*

These conceptions of democracy are limited to 'formal' or 'procedural' definitions of democracy, and apply primarily to liberal democracies. In a sharp contrast to such definitions, Huber, Rueschemeyer and Stephens (1997) make a clear distinction between 'formal democracy' and 'social democracy'. According to them, 'formal democracy' is 'a political system that combines four features: regular free and fair elections, universal suffrage, accountability of the state's administrative organs to the elected representatives, and effective guarantees for freedom of expression and association as well as protection against arbitrary state action' (1997: 323). To them, such a system does not provide 'equal distribution of political power' and does not 'reduce social and economic inequality' (*ibid.*: 324). They further hold that a political system that meets the criteria of 'formal democracy' amended with 'equal distribution of political power' is a 'participatory democracy', while a political system that goes further still and includes the goal of reducing social and economic inequality would qualify as 'social democracy' (*ibid.*). Although less inclusive, Joseph also argues for a need to go beyond a minimalist definition of democracy and suggests that the 'dominant way of characterizing democracy according to a set of electionist, institutionalist, and proceduralist criteria must be expanded into a broader conceptualization' (Joseph, 1997: 365). Held (1996: 2) proposes what he calls 'democratic autonomy' (or 'liberal socialism'), which protects citizens both from the 'economic power' of accumulated capital as well as from 'the dangers of centralized political power' of the left.

These competing conceptions of democracy appear to be limited to and generally drawn from Western experiences of democracy. The key question in light of our study is – how much of such experiences can be related to the situation of multi-ethnic polities of the Third World such as Ethiopia? Or to what extent can the models of democracy developed in the context of the Western World solve the chronic problem of governance in the conflict-ridden, multi-ethnic societies of the Third World, which so far have had frustrating experiences with democracy? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed in any intellectual enterprise aimed at solving the riddles of democratising Third-World multi-ethnic societies.

### ***Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and Democracy: A Tenuous Relationship?***

Yet another difficult part in the study of ethnic nationalism in contemporary politics is to establish its relationship with democracy. In this regard, work on *Nationalism*,

*Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy* edited by Diamond and Plattner (1994) contains interesting debates that cover the whole range of possibilities, from 'marriage' between nationalism and democracy to the presentation of nationalism as a force 'allergic' to democracy. For instance, Nodia (1994: 4), who makes a distinction between 'home-grown' and 'imported' liberal democracies, forcefully argues that 'the idea of nationalism is impossible – indeed unthinkable – without the idea of democracy, and that democracy never exists without nationalism' and sharply disagrees with Fukuyama's view of the incompatibility of nationalism and liberal democracy (*ibid.*). Fukuyama (1994: 23–28) on his part, although recognizing the role nationalism played in the retirement of socialism, underlines what he calls the 'illiberal' and 'anti-democratic' aspects of nationalism. He further argues that nationalism is inherently anti-democratic. In the same work, Pesic (1994: 132–135) even goes further to show what he describes as 'the cruel face of nationalism'.

Mann, on his part, stresses that 'exclusionary nationalism' is a result of the 'failure to institutionalize democracy' and that the attempt to suppress it by authoritarian methods 'may result in aggressive nationalist movements'. To him, the solution is 'to achieve democracy, especially 'federal inter-regional democracy' (Periwal's summary, 1995: 233). Some intellectuals like Nnoli (1995) have attempted to show the complexity of ethnic nationalism and have underlined the need to differentiate between the legitimate demands of dominated ethnic groups and the chauvinistic tendencies of the hegemonic groups with the aspiration to dominate others.

McGarry and O'Leary (1993) illustrate, among other things, the wisdom of representation based on 'federation' and 'consociation or power-sharing' in regulating and mediating ethnic conflicts in divided societies. In the more specific African context, Nnoli (1995) addresses the two major currents in post-colonial Africa in terms of their history and their contemporary manifestations. He attempts to establish 'the conjuncture of ethnic conflicts and democratisation in Africa' by considering the mutual impacts of the two upon each other. He also suggests the need to mediate their contradictory aspects by institutionalising 'a democracy that guarantees both individual and group rights, balances them and provides an institutional framework for greater participation in decision making' (1995: 24). In a nutshell, the attempt to link ethnic nationalism to democracy and democratisation positively or negatively is not conclusively settled in either way. But experiences of Africa and most of the multi-ethnic societies across the Third World show that the model of democracy based on the primacy of individual rights seems not to work well. The same experiences also show us, as Joseph (1997: 366) observed, 'pluralist and competitive democracy in Africa has tended to take the form of competition among communities rather than individuals, parties, and administrative sub-units.' No less importantly, despite rallying cries in the name of 'nation-building' by every African leader – civilian or military – demands of ethnic groups not only persisted but even led to devastating civil wars and the collapse of some states. Furthermore, most

people across the Third World never totally abandoned their communal values and continued to act collectively despite the penetration of Western values. Hence, in spite of serious reservation shown by some academics to the introduction of group rights in situations like South Africa (Milazi, 1996; Szeftel, 1994) where demands for group rights are associated with people who had been beneficiaries under apartheid, a democratic model, which accommodates both individual and group rights seems to be more applicable in situations such as Ethiopia.

To sum up our discussion of the theoretical part, the following generalisation can be made regarding ethnicity and its impact on state transformation and the democratisation enterprise thereof. First, ethnicity and nationalism are generally better conceived as ideology of mobilisation of collectivities for political ends informed by the struggle for power and resources that may be resolved within or outside a given state. Secondly, the élites, who usually have their own vested interests but may also (claim to) represent the interests of the masses, play crucial roles in the mobilisation of collectivities. And as a result, ethnicity and nationalism tend to lead to competing, often contradictory demands on the state. Thirdly, as corollary to this, ethnicity and nationalism pit one ethnic group against another by creating the 'us' and 'they' divide, where issues of identity matter more than socio-economic questions. As in such cases staying in power depends on the ethnic balance to be forged. It generally tempts the ruling élite to devise a divide-and-rule policy, usually by manipulating ethnicity. Fourthly, under conditions of politicised ethnicity and/or competing nationalisms, the struggle for power involves convoluted alignments of the few and the many, and saddles ruling minorities with a sense of insecurity. This in turn causes distrust among the competing élites and so undermines the political consensus needed for democratisation to succeed. Fifthly, ethnicity and nationalism generally tend to fragment and weaken civil society organisations – the very pillars of democracy – by obstructing their unity across ethnic divides. Finally, although the conventional assumption that democracy is the better way to mediate conflicts that may arise from ethnic differences is acknowledged, plurality of ideas is seen as challenging the dominant status quo because ethnicity and nationalism tend to be exclusivist. Cumulatively these conditions are likely to have serious impact on the democratisation of multi-ethnic states such as Ethiopia, where politicisation of ethnicity and/or competing ethnic nationalisms already have a debilitating effect on the attempt to democratise state and society.

## **Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the New Attempts at State Transformation**

### ***Ethnic Nationalism and the Rise of the TPLF***

The rising expectations that followed the 1974 revolutionary upheaval in Ethiopia had led to the rise of many liberation and social movements, one of which was the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The original agenda of the movement

was to liberate Tigray from a century of Amhara domination (Aregawi, 1993; Young, 1997; Merera, 2002). To be sure, since its creation in 1975, it has pursued such a goal very flexibly and pragmatically as dictated by the political expediency of the day. Using the Marxist-Leninist principle of 'the right to self-determination of nations and nationalities, including secession', a principle that had been popular among the Ethiopian youth of the day, it effectively used both Marxism and Tigrayan nationalism to mobilise the Tigrayan peasantry.

Marxism was 'officially' discarded and replaced by 'liberal democracy' after the capture of state power by the group in 1991 while Tigrayan nationalism has continued to serve as a moving spirit in the post-1991 remaking of the Ethiopian state. And, as we shall see below, both ethnic nationalism and the official multi-party democracy ideology, have been fashioned to serve the hegemonic interest of the Tigrayan élite.<sup>1</sup> Here, the official discarding of the Marxist-Leninist ideology appears to be necessitated by the imperatives of the new 'World Order' whose twin criteria for legitimacy are based on political pluralism and the sanctity of free enterprise. The TPLF, whose ethnic support base is one of the country's minorities in the North constituting about 6 per cent of the country's population had to devise a strategy that could help it to outflank the major contending forces from the other ethnic groups. Consequently, the dual strategy of the TPLF leadership is to preach liberal democracy on the one hand to attract the support of the donors and continue to adhere to its Marxist past of 'revolutionary democracy' on the other. Arguably, its ultimate goal has been to ensure the centrality of Tigrayan nationalism in the reordering of the Ethiopian State and society (Leenco, 1999; Merera, 1994c). And, in the new scheme of things, 'the right to self-determination and secession' and the ethnic-based federal arrangement have been carefully designed in a manner they could serve the dominance of the new Tigrayan elite in power.

Thus, in the post-1991 period ethnicity has become the cornerstone of the major policy initiatives (see Charter, 1991; Constitution, 1994), i.e. political issues, economic matters or educational, linguistic and cultural domains. Put differently, the critical issues at the July Conference of 1991, the fundamentals of the Transitional Charter, the organisational basis of the Transitional Government and the decentralisation of the administrative structure as well as the constitutional engineering were all informed by the imperatives of competing ethnic nationalisms. Consequently, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front/Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (TPLF/EPRDF), which achieved an impressive military victory in coordination with the Eritreans was able to extend the basic tenets in its own political programme to the basic tenets in the Charter of the July Conference, later the Constitution of 1994, where the basic principles such as 'the right to self-determination' has been canonised in line with the political philosophy of 'revolutionary democracy'.<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, the central problem associated with the EPRDF-sponsored experiment at multiparty democracy is that it was born and matured as a guerrilla force under the guidance of 'revolutionary democracy', to which it covertly continues to adhere and

its overt shift to liberal democracy after assumption of state power. The sole purpose of such behaviour appears to be the promotion of the hegemony of the Tigrayan élite in the face of strong resistance from other competing ethnic nationalisms. Ethnic nationalism, which, thus, has become the new base for the restructuring of the Ethiopian State, ends up serving the hegemonic interest of the victorious Tigrayan élite rather than the hoped-for decentralisation of power and multiparty democracy', which, in theory, should promote stability and meaningful economic development.

### ***The July Conference and the Remaking of Ethiopia***

The TPLF/EPRDF marched to power in May 1991 with the motto of 'national struggle first' as opposed to class struggle, despite its background of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism. After capturing state-power, it moved fast with the wind of the day to embrace the philosophy of multiparty democracy more by the post-Cold War imperatives than by faith in the ballot box. And, contrary to popular expectation, it has remained loyal to its old principle of 'national struggle first', which has become the main base for state transformation. In the chain of events, the July Conference of 1991 became the first major act in the remaking of Ethiopian state and society by the new regime.

The objective of the July Conference as officially stated was to establish a 'legitimate and broad-based' transitional government that can prepare the country for a smooth democratic transformation as agreed at the American-brokered London Peace Conference (Cohen, 1991). But the EPRDF leaders, whose priority seems to be consolidation of their hard-won victory had selectively invited weaker political organisations most of which were instantly created and excluded the actual or potential real power contenders from the process.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the more than two dozen political groups invited to attend the conference had neither the political muscle nor an agenda of their own, except the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which negotiated a junior partnership as well as the right to independently mobilise its own political support base (*Africa Confidential*, 1991; Merera, 1992). As such the major outcomes were two: the Transitional Charter and the Transitional Government. The former, which was approved with little or no resistance, was designed to serve as the supreme law of the land for the transitional period. Based on the Charter, 87-seat Council of Representatives (COR) was created mainly out of the representatives of the participating political groups based on a pre-determined quota set by the EPRDF itself. Of the 87 seats, the EPRDF took a lion's share (32 seats) and distributed the remainder as handouts to the more than two dozen political groups. The Council was empowered to make laws for the whole transitional period and, except the OLF, which was able to secure 12 seats, other parties mostly received one or two seats and had little, if any, political influence. The TGE was proclaimed by the COR while the executive branch of the TGE was also created out of the same COR. And according to many critics, with high level of political manoeuvres that was



supported by military muscle and tacit support of the Western donors, especially the Americans, who were delighted with the demise of Mengistu's regime, the EPRDF easily achieved two of its main political objectives: the approval of the Charter and the establishment of a transitional government that was comfortably controlled by itself (Merera, 1992; 1994a; b; Leenco, 1999)

To be sure, the EPRDF-authored Charter, which provided a legal basis for the new regime contained both positive elements that have opened the way for visible political liberalisation measures as well as provisions, which have had detrimental impacts on the country's quest for democracy. On the positive side it stipulated the new regime's commitment to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, especially the "freedom of conscience, expression, association, ... peaceable assembly, ... right to engage in unrestricted political activity and to organise political parties". It also contained the provisions that promised to address the historical grievances of the hitherto marginalised ethnic groups. Above all else, the Charter promised the creation of a federal democratic republic that ends ethnic domination and ensures good governance. To translate the promises made on paper, a regionalisation policy was proclaimed and carried out while the country's command economy has been replaced by a more liberal economic policy.

As noted earlier, despite the more promising beginning, the hegemonic aspiration of the new elite on the one hand and the imperatives of transforming the Ethiopian state and society along democratic lines on the other have very quickly led to new types of contradictions that have had a negative impact on the transition. And, as it will be clearer further down, the rising expectations, which are inherent in competing ethnic nationalisms have further compounded the task of the democratisation enterprise.

### ***PDOs and the Regionalisation Policy***

Following the spirit of the Charter, a regionalisation policy was proclaimed at the beginning of 1992 on the basis of which the country was restructured into 14 regions.<sup>4</sup> This policy was basically aimed at addressing the demands for self-rule by the hitherto marginalised ethnic groups. Consequently, the framers of the regionalisation policy have hoped to implement it through the creation of the Peoples' Democratic Organisations (PDOs).<sup>5</sup> Put differently, it is the strategy of manufacturing a political support base by creating controlled ethnic-based organisations for the various ethnic groups of the country, which has helped the real ruling party to speak through the other ethnic groups, win elections and rule the country in the name of all the peoples of Ethiopia. The classical use of the PDOs system is a decentralisation of power on paper and centralisation in practice through the PDOs (Leenco, 1999; Aalen, 2000a).

Contrary to the spirit of democracy as well as genuine federation, the functions and the loyalty of the PDOs as instrument of central control are ensured both through the formal structure of the party and government and the parallel informal structures where cadres are planted in the PDOs and the regional structures at various levels. The formal party structure is that of the EPRDF, which has been fully controlled by the TPLF until the split of the TPLF itself in 2001. The TPLF as the creator of the PDOs that constitute the EPRDF has been at the top of the pyramidal informal power structure. And, according to inside-house information as well as testimonies of key defectors from the regime, decisions are generally made by the TPLF polibureau and/or central committee and taken to the EPRDF for rubber-stamping. The PDOs, which are controlled both through the formal application of the party rules based on democratic centralism and the TPLF assigned hard-core cadres implement the decisions made by the TPLF/EPRDF leading bodies without any serious questions that can be asked by real autonomous local leaders.

True to the *modus operandi* of a *de facto* one-party state, the government structure is controlled by and subordinate to a party structure. Hence, in the 5-tier government structure, i.e. federal, regional, *Zonal*, *Woreda* and *Kebele* levels, the TPLF practically controls the central government by occupying the key posts of the Prime Ministership, the Foreign Ministry as well as the key posts in the army, the police and security structure. In other words, the TPLF, which controls the PDOs through the EPRDF, in turn controls the regional and other tiers of local governments through the PDOs. Here, it is important to note that the regional governments are staffed and operated by the PDO officials, who are either appointed or assumed office through mock elections. As Young has observed, the activities of the PDO cadres are supervised and their decisions are cleared at the top while they “have little political or military experiences, generally have low levels of education, frequently appear to be motivated by opportunism, and not surprisingly, have little legitimacy among their constituents” (1997: 212)

The end result is as Aalen argues:

*The centralized party structure of the EPRDF is clearly contradictory to the provisions of the federal and regional constitutions, which give these levels the right to self-determination. It promotes upward accountability to the party organs above rather than downward accountability to the people of the region, Woreda and Kebele. The constitutional rights for the regions to formulate and implement plans and policies are severely diminished by the fact that the regional governments, which are all under the EPRDF's hegemony, follow the centrally designed policies and five-year plans... in the Ethiopian case, the party structures are centralized, and when the state and party are the same this leads inevitably to a centralized division of state power (2002:80).*

Aalen further points out that there is the existence of “dual administration” where “politics outside of the legal framework” (*ibid.*) dominates the *modus operandi* of the

EPRDF federation. Here, it is important to note that according to the officially stated objectives of its authors, the regionalisation policy was designed to serve the larger goal of democratisation of the Ethiopian State by promoting the decentralisation of power where the hitherto marginalised ethnic communities are empowered to govern themselves and conduct their own affairs, develop their own economies, culture and language without interference (TGE Charter, 1991; Constitution, 1994). But the regionalisation initiative through the PDOs has quickly led to a new type of domination (Ottaway, 1995; Harbeson, 1998). Hence, the regionalisation policy, which was a positive initiative rather than satisfying the demands of the hitherto subaltern groups for self-rule appears to have served the divide-and-rule policy of the now dominant Tigrayan élite (see Hovde, 1994; Paul, 2000; Vestal, 1994a). Furthermore, it has led to the rise of many unanswered questions such as what type of federation – ethnically or territorially-based? Which rights are to have priority – collective or individual? What model of party organisation – ethnic or multi-ethnic? What type of electoral laws? What should be the national education and language policies of the country? etc.

### *The June Elections of 1992*

Following its regionalisation policy, the new regime had undertaken the regional elections of 1992, which became the first acid test for the new regime's decentralisation of power as well as the democratisation initiatives. The legal framework for this election was laid down by proclamation No. 7/1992, which was enacted to serve as a basis for the restructuring of the country's regional administration along linguistic and/or ethnic lines. The twin objectives of these elections were to legitimise the EPRDF's rule and ensure local autonomy. The former objective hoped to be met by making the process 'free and fair' in the eyes of the Ethiopian public and the international community while the latter objective was to be met by establishing a popularly elected local government. Moreover, the largest international observer groups ever were invited to judge the fairness of the process and to legitimise it in the eyes of the international community.

Not surprisingly, as the stakes in the June 1992 elections were high for both the incumbent government and the major opposition groups, the already existing atmosphere of distrust and suspicion easily turned to that of confrontation. The OLF, the then major contending group, was forced to withdraw from the election process at the eleventh hour. With the boycott of legally registered parties like Islamic Front for Liberation of Oromia (IFLO), All Amhara People's Organisation (AAPO), the Southern Ethiopian groups and the exclusion of older parties like the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (popularly known as MEISON), the June 1992 election turned out to be an affair of the ruling party. As a result, according to the National Democratic Institute/African American Institute (NDI/AAI) Report of 1992 (NDI/AAI, 1992: 7):

*The June 21 elections did not contribute directly to Ethiopia's development as a democratic state. At best, the elections were premature, especially for the southern half of Ethiopia. Less kindly judged, the elections were ill conceived, dubious and counter-productive in their contribution to the democratization of Ethiopia. The elections, moreover, exacerbated existing tensions, reinforced the hegemony of the EPRDF while marginalizing other fledgling parties and were a central factor in the withdrawal of the OLF from the TGE and the return to war in the Oromo region. Finally, the elections created new 'political facts'...the EPRDF dominated regional and district assemblies...that will remain controversial in regions where the elections are mired in doubt and suspicion.*

Following elections, the EPRDF quickly moved to set up local governments, which in the eyes of the opponents were neither democratic nor autonomous. Thus, in what seemed to be a new style of authoritarianism, the TPLF ensured its domination over Tigray while the rest of the EPRDF's constituent parts, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (EPDM) later Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the pro-EPRDF Southern Ethiopian group established a monopoly of power over the Oromo, Amhara and Southern Ethiopian regions respectively (Pausewang, 1992; Hovde, 1994; Vestal, 1994a). Consequently, the elections that were hoped to lead to power sharing and empowerment of local communities have led to yet another confrontation, which has obstructed the meaningful opening up of the political space.

### ***Closing the Transitional Period Through Constitutional Engineering***

As agreed upon during the writing of the Charter, the constitution-making process was central to both the consolidation of power and legitimacy for the new ruling élite. To this end, in the period between June 1992 and December 1994, the EPRDF worked out the technical aspects of the constitution-making process while the consolidation of power has continued more aggressively. The EPRDF-controlled Council of Representatives (COR) appointed a Constitutional Drafting Commission in 1993 pursuant to Article 10 for the transition period (Charter, 1991). To ensure the loyalty of the Commission to the incumbent regime, members of the Commission were mostly selected from members of the EPRDF-dominated Council of Representatives itself while the few Commission members who were appointed outside of the Council were subject to the approval of the same body (Merera, 1994a; b; Vestal, 1996; Paul, 2000).

Despite opposition to it from the various sectors of Ethiopian society, especially from the organised groups and lack of national consensus, the TPLF/EPRDF put the Draft Constitution to the vote of a Constituent Assembly controlled by itself in December 1994 (Pausewang, 1994b; Paul, 2000). No less importantly, many controversial articles such as 'the right to self-determination, including secession', the ethnic-based federal structure of government, continued government ownership of land, were all approved without a serious debate and no dissent voice. As

such, in the eyes of many observers the new national constitution of Ethiopia is a replica of the EPRDF programme in both letter and spirit (Cf. EPRDF Programme, 1991; EHRCO, 1995; Vestal, 1996). And, contrary to the claim of the framers of the Constitution for its being both liberal as well as one that can pass the test of time, as one foreign critic has argued even before its official approval:

*the draft constitution embodies essentially what the EPRDF/TGE wishes the world outside and its own people to believe about the political order. It does not express political reality but instead is a façade behind which the true actuality of the Marxist-Leninist political order is hidden. The constitution does not restrain government because it is not an expression of a firm belief in the importance of doing so. Exercise of power in such a system is not subject to review by someone other than the holder of the power – the antithesis of constitutionalism (Vestal, 1996: 35f)*

To both Ethiopian and foreign observers, the making of the national Constitution appears to be the attempt by the TPLF leaders to ensure the permanency of the remaking of Ethiopia and their hegemonic position in the reordered state. At any rate, like the Charter, the Constitution contains important provisions that guarantee, albeit on paper, a pluralistic political system as well as rights of citizens.

The May 1995 elections, which followed the approval of the Constitution that opened the way for the country's Second Republic, were neither free nor fair. Put differently, they were held to bestow the much-needed legitimacy on the emerging *de facto* one party state. And, needless to add, the 2000 elections and the other measures taken by the new regime in the post-1995 period were all aimed at further consolidation of power in the face of stubborn resistance by the opposition as well as the public at large.<sup>6</sup> As indicated earlier, the central problem in the TPLF/EPRDF-sponsored hoped for democratic transformation is basically the contradictory aspirations of the leading Tigyaran elite, i.e. the aspiration to ensure its hegemonic position by any means necessary on the one hand while aspiring to create an open democratic society through free and fair elections on the other. What make such contradictory aspirations more difficult are that, ethnically speaking, the political support base of the TPLF is a minority from the North, which constitute about 6% of the country's population, compared to the Oromos and Amharas who share between them about two-thirds of the country's population.

A closer look at the *problematique* of the Ethiopian transition clearly shows that while some of the major bottle-necks to the Ethiopian democratisation have to do with the hegemonic aspiration of the TPLF leaders, some are more fundamental, emanate from and informed by competing ethnic nationalisms. As indicated in our discussion of the theoretical part, ethnic nationalism is mobilisation of ethnic groups for collective action in the struggle for greater share of power or the creation of separate statehood by the hitherto marginalised groups. It can also be for the maintenance of the existing *status quo* by privileged groups. Central to the moving spirit of ethnic nationalism is the collective aspirations and demands

advanced in the name of the collectivity where the role of elite is critical both in the articulation of the nationalist agendas and mobilisation of multitudes for the implementation of the agendas. In this regard, an important point to note is that collective rights, which are central in ethnic nationalism, do often contradict the idea of individual rights, the very foundation of liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1994; Poluha, 1996). What has come out with the ethnicisation of politics since the change of the Ethiopian regime in 1991 has been the double pressure on the state very often to fulfill the contradictory demands of collectivities on the one hand and individual rights of citizens on the other. This has further raised the *problematic* of creating a political structure that is able to accommodate and harmonise the demands of competing ethnic nationalisms on the one hand and collective demands alongside with individual rights on the other.

In the Ethiopian context, there are several crucial issues related to the creation of such a political structure. First, the TPLF/EPRDF has recognised the right to self-determination both in the Charter of 1991 as well as the Constitution of 1994. This has led to a fear on the part of some Ethiopians that recognising such a right could lead to the disintegration of the country. Furthermore, the practical implementation of such a right has not been easy in light of the claims and counter claims of the various ethnic nationalist groups.

Secondly, the right to self-rule provisions enacted in the country's Constitution appears to be implemented through the PDOs. But, as indicated above, the PDOs, which were created for political expediency could not evolve as an embodiment of genuine autonomy and self-rule. The end result is a three-dimensional conflict, where the ruling élite together with its PDOs is pitted against the independently initiated political organisations of the various ethnic groups and the contradictions between the various independent groups themselves. The best examples of the latter are the Oromo and Amhara-based political organisations, which are against each other as much as, if not more, against the ruling élite.

Thirdly, competing ethnic nationalisms tend to create the problem of majorities and minorities with respect to basic rights in the ethnically reconstituted regions. An important matter to be noted here is that Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic state of not less than eighty ethnic groups of varying sizes, which have been mingling for centuries across the country's plateau where ethnic boundaries are very porous, especially in gerrymandered areas and major cities. Moreover, the descendants of the empire builders and other people who moved from the relatively exhausted North to the relatively richer South constitute several millions whose rights are difficult to ignore. Taken together, this raises the problem of guaranteeing the rights of minorities under a condition of acute competing ethnic nationalisms where minorities are generally pitted against majorities.

Fourthly, the TPLF/EPRDF, which has sponsored the Ethiopian democratisation enterprise has continued to adhere to the modus operandi of democratic

centralism, which has been part of its old socialist ideology now officially discarded to give way to the principles of liberal democracy. This has further complicated the task of democratising the Ethiopian state as the application of the principle has the tendency of obstructing power sharing and self-rule, both of which are central in the project of creating a federal democratic republic such as Ethiopia.

In summary, the TPLF/EPRDF upon assumption of state power in May 1991 has promised the three greatest needs of Ethiopia: stability, democratic governance and quick economic development by creating an egalitarian nation-state of equals in which all the country's diverse communities are empowered. And, if we have to draw the balance sheet of the regime's achievements thirteen years later against its failures, the latter clearly outweighs the former with visible discrepancies between the promises made on paper and the reality on the ground. In other words, despite four major elections as well as various policy initiatives, the *modus operandi* of the Ethiopian state has remained authoritarian. Hegemonic aspirations on the part of the dominant elite as well as the contradictory perspectives and claims of the other competing nationalist elites on the other has led to the derailment of the much-publicised 'democratic transition'. In fact, the big 'democratic' promise of the Charter on which the whole transitional process hinged, the transfer of power to a democratically elected party was pushed aside and a *de facto* one-party state was further institutionalised. Consequently, the massive violations of human and democratic rights, repression of political parties as well as civil society organisations and the harassment of the nascent independent press have continued unabated all of which have a debilitating effect on the hoped for democratic transformation (See EHRCO, 1995; 2000).

As ethnicity tends to lead to extremist positions such as who is an authentic nationalist and who is not, the Ethio-Eritrean conflict of 1998 had brought to the fore the tensions within the TPLF leadership that appear to have been building over the years regarding the Eritrean independence. Arguably, although the main cause of the split within the TPLF/EPRDF hard-core cadres seems to be power struggle, the leaders of both wings of this organisation have admitted making serious errors in the whole process of state transformation. The victorious wing, which is led by the Prime Minister, claimed to have launched a rectification movement code-named 'renewal' in which it has promised to hasten up the democratisation drive. But, despite much talk about the "renewal", the TPLF revolution has continued as originally modelled along 'revolutionary democracy' and seems to be the Ethiopian version of Mao's 'New Democracy'. (see EPRDF, 2001). Competing ethnic nationalisms, which tend to lead to a divergent conception of democracy, which in turn obstruct the creation of a broad national consensus are also additional burden on Ethiopia's democratisation. And with the third national elections less than a year away and little movement towards broad consensus among the contending nationalist elites, the democratisation process appears to be as frozen as ever.

## Conclusion

Upon the assumption of state power in 1991, the new regime has made a triple promise in its project of state transformation: stability, democratisation and quick economic development by ending both ethnic domination and the command economy. To this end, in what appears to be a thorough surgical operation of the country's body politic, the EPRDF sponsored the July conference of 1991, authored the transitional Charter of 1991 as well as the national constitution of 1994 and conducted major elections in June 1992 and 1994, May 1995 and 2000. However, according to many critics, most of the initiatives along the opening up of a democratic space have remained a paper value (Vestal, 1994a; 1994b; Joseph, 1998).

As we have attempted to show above, the most serious *problematique* in the Ethiopian transition are the hegemonic aspiration of the ruling elite on the one hand and the pervasive impact of competing ethnic nationalisms on the other. Here it is important to note that both have given rise to multiple competing interests and contradictory visions, especially among the contending elites. Put differently, as has been indicated in our preceding discussion, the hegemonic aspiration as well as the contradictory perspectives have impacted on the democratisation drive at several levels. First, they have negatively affected the political will of the competing élites to reach a national consensus on the fundamental rules of the game of democratic transition as well as on the future fate of the country as a whole.

Secondly, they have fragmented the opposition, undermined their unity of purpose and action while giving advantage to the ruling party to continue to divide, harass, intimidate and weaken the opposition. Thirdly, the contradictory perspectives not only pitted one ethnic group against another, but have also affected the working of civil society movements and the independent press, which, as a result of this, are as fragmented as the political society. The central issue in these schemes of things is the competing demands on the state, which give rise to practical political questions such as what type of party formation – (ethnic or multi-ethnic), what type of federal model to be adopted – (ethnic-based or territory-based), and who is the authentic representative of a given group? The attempt to answer such pertinent questions would easily lead to competing conceptions of democracy. In other words, competing ethnic nationalisms tend to give rise to inter-élite and inter-ethnic rivalries and competition driven by competing interests, demands, perspectives and hegemonic aspirations of the various elites all of which undermine the broader agenda of democratising state and society on the basis of equality. Therefore, what needs to be suggested in conclusion as the possible way out of the present political quagmire is the creation of an accommodative political structure by the consent of the citizens where both power and resources are equitably shared and the imperative of development is commonly pursued.



## Endnotes

1. To many observers, Tigrayan nationalism has been more of resurgence nationalism – to regain the centrality of Tigray in the Ethiopian State which the Tigrayan élite lost to the Amhara élite in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
2. The TPLF/EPRDF leadership formulated revolutionary democracy based on Mao's New Democracy. The anomaly came when revolutionary democracy formulated for a socialist revolution was made to serve the cause of liberal democracy and free enterprise. The most serious pitfall in the Ethiopian democratisation enterprise is, therefore, the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of revolutionary democracy being made to guide a liberal democratic transformation.
3. For further discussion of what happened at the July Conference and afterwards, see among others, 'Ethiopia: Majorities and Minorities' in *Africa Confidential* Vol. 32, No. 14 (12 July 1991); EHRCO, (1995) Merera Gudina (1994)
4. Both before and after capturing state power, the TPLF has been creating one ethnic organisation almost for each ethnic group in the country under similar name 'peoples democratic organisation' to ensure its own domination in the reordered Ethiopian State. That is why all are referred to as PDOs. The PDOs are neither autonomous nor have any real existence of their own. As such they don't enjoy respect both by the TPLF leaders who created them or the larger Ethiopian public.
5. Initially fourteen regions were carved out. Twelve of them comprised several dozen 'nations, nationalities and peoples' and Addis Ababa and Harar cities were given regional status. Regions One, Two, Three, Four and Five were mainly designated for the Tigrayans, Afars, Amharas, Oromos and Somalis respectively, while the rest of the regions are cohabited by a number of ethnic groups of different population sizes. Later on, Dire Dawa evolved as a special region for reason of its being a bone of contention between Oromos and Somalis. Regions 7 to 11 have been lumped together to form a larger southern region, for reasons of political considerations and administrative expediency.
6. Most opposition parties, AAPO, Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE), Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) and Oromo National Congress (ONC), demanded a serious negotiation with a ruling party over the rules of the game for the conduct of 'free and fair' elections during May 2000. The ruling party, fully conscious of the implications, has remained adamant to the end.

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