*Review of African Political Economy* No.70:531-542

*ISSN 0305-6244; RIX #7006*

# Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia

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**Ethiopia is implementing a radical programme of decentralising state power to ethnic-based regional units, which could be of interest to other countries in Africa faced with demands of ethnic communities for a greater role in the state. This apparent empowerment of ethnicity represents a complete reversal of this country's past practices, and is the joint product of the ethnocratic character of the state until recently and the policies adopted by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) in its long struggle against the military regime that ruled Ethiopia during 1974-1991. This article examines the processes that brought forth this novel, and for Africa unprecedented, constitutional arrangement.**

## Ethiopia's New Constitution

The overthrow of the military regime, or Derg, in May 1991, brought the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to power. The EPRDF is a coalition of ethnic political movements, dominated by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) which fought a sixteen year war against the Derg in the northern province of Tigray. After assuming power, the EPRDF set about implementing new and controversial policies, the most contentious of which was the acceptance of Eritrea's independence, and the reversal of the age-old quest of Ethiopian rulers to centralise state and integrate a population belonging to more than eighty ethnic groups, or nationalities as they are called here. The EPRDF chose instead to accord political recognition to all ethnic groups, and to devolve power to regional and district administrative units representing ethnic communities. In fact the 1995 Constitution (Art. 39) proclaims 'every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession' (Endnote1) The constitution then goes on specify the conditions under which this right can be exercised, and these include a two-thirds vote of the regional legislature, the organisation by the federal government of a referendum on the issue, a majority support of voters in the referendum, and a mutually agreed division of assets.

While decentralisation has been on the political agenda in Africa since the 1970s, no government on the continent has devolved powers on an ethnic basis; nor has any government explicitly granted its constituent parts the legal right to secede. This radical break with the past is the key objective of the new government, and one that has great significance potentially for other countries in Africa which share Ethiopia's problems of ethnic conflict. The following paragraphs will outline the historical and political context in which this policy emerged and will examine its implementation and implications.

It is argued that the EPRDF's unique approach is not – in spite of appearances to the contrary – the result of bargaining in the post-Derg period. It is first a forthright, if

controversial, response to the legacy of ethnic domination and marginalisation in the Ethiopian state, and secondly a product of the course the TPLF followed in the conduct of its revolutionary struggle. It is not a 'leap in the dark' (Brietzke, 1994), as some have described it, but perhaps the only approach that could ensure the unity and survival of the Ethiopian into the twenty-first century. Certainly, it is a high risk strategy, and its success is far from certain.

## Ethnicity and the State

The Ethiopian state traces its roots to the Axumite civilisation in the first millennium BC, whose centre was in what is now the province of Tigray. Although it declined after the seventh century AD, Axum's legacy was sustained in the core of what was to become Ethiopia in the form of Coptic Christianity, *Geez* the liturgical language of the Church which is the basis of the modern languages of Tigrigna and Amharigna spoken by the two branches of the Abyssinian family, and a feudal system that survived up the 1974 revolution. This legacy is an enduring source of pride for all Tigrayans, although their province was increasingly marginalised in an empire-state dominated by the far more numerous Amharas, particularly by the Amhara nobility from the central province of Shoa in recent times. According to Markakis (1994:73), the social structure of traditional Amhara-Tigray society represents the 'classic trinity of noble, priest and peasant', and what fundamentally distinguishes the three classes is their 'relationship to the only means of production, that is land'. From time immemorial until the introduction of the Derg's land reform in 1975, the vast majority of the northern-peasantry held land under the *rist* tenure system which ensured that every Christian Abyssinian was entitled to a piece of land.

In the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of this century the Shoan Emperor Menelik II incorporated the lands and peoples of the south, east, and west into an empire which became the modern state of Ethiopia. Much of the conquered land was given to court and church officials, soldiers, and settlers from the north who were encouraged to migrate to the region. Unlike the north, southern lands were fertile, suitable for valuable export crops like coffee, and the indigenous population could be dispossessed. The Abyssinian nobility, especially the Shoan branch which dominated the imperial state, were the main beneficiaries of the expansion. The increasingly destitute peasants of Tigray and the other northern provinces derived few advantages from it, though unlike the southern peoples, they could not be easily deprived of their lands.

The objective of Ethiopia's rulers, even before Menelik, was the centralisation of the feudal state, and this involved a measure of modernization and the import of military, bureaucratic, and educational technologies that could only be paid for with agricultural exports. Although receiving few benefits from modernisation, the Tigrayans did feel the impact of centralisation. They felt it in the deteriorating authority of their traditional regional rulers, the imposition of Amharigna as the official state language, and progressive general decline of their province. The Tigrayan nobility, and later the emerging petty bourgeoisie had to compete with their Amhara counterparts for positions and status within a state in which they were junior partners.

One expression of Tigrayan resentment was the *Woyene* rebellion that broke out in the province in the aftermath of the Italian collapse in 1941, and was provoked by attempt of the Haile Selassie regime to reimpose taxation and Amhara hegemony. Although quickly overcome with the timely assistance of British aerial bombing, the TPLF

regards the rebellion as representing a revolt of an oppressed nation against Shoan Amhara oppression. However, a historian of the *Woyene*, Gebru Tareke (1977:215), contends that, 'the peasants rebelled against the state not particularly because it was controlled and dominated by the Shewan Amhara but primarily because it was oppressive'. Tigrayans resentment may have been more intense than in other parts of Ethiopia, but it was by no means unique, and rebellions broke out in other parts of the country, including Amhara Gojjam. At any rate, the Woyene revolt entered the mythology of the TPLF, demonstrated the combativeness of the peasants, and the need for effective leadership if the Amhara regime was to be successfully challenged.

With the restoration of Haile Selassie in 1941, following the liberation of Ethiopia from the Italian rule, a reinvigorated government pursued a policy of centralization by weakening the provincial nobility, the bureaucratization of the state apparatus, the formation of a professional army, and the launching of modern education. There was little scope in this process for the integration of the various ethnic groups, beyond the selective incorporation of individuals who accepted assimilation into the Amhara culture and society. To the extent they were successful, these policies greatly increased the power of the imperial autocrat, and solidified the Amhara dominance in the state and economy. On the other hand, they produced the educated counter-elite and petty bourgeoisie which eventually proved the autocrats undoing.

This event was presaged in the 1960 coup attempt by Haile Selassie's bodyguard army unit. This represented the first significant stirrings of political discontent in the modernizing sector of Ethiopian society. It was the expression of a broader conflict between a multi-ethnic petty bourgeoisie increasingly aware of its capacity and lack of power, and an old regime based on privilege and status and unwilling to share power. There was, as well, the contradiction between the dominant position of a Shoan Amhara elite and the political marginalisation of the majority of the population. The revolt in Eritrea that Haile Selassie precipitated by arbitrarily ending the federal system under which the self-governing territory was linked to Ethiopia, was another powerful challenge to the legitimacy of the imperial regime. There were similar rebellious incidents among the Somali in the southeast and some Oromo groups in the south. And last, there was the fundamental class-cum-ethnic contradiction in southern Ethiopia – between an minority who held most of the land and a native majority forced to work on what had been their land for the benefit of interlopers.

The most explosive conflict, however, proved to be between a regime claiming a monopoly of state power and a politically ambitious petty bourgeoisie; such conflicts have been the cause of conflict throughout Africa. However, in Ethiopia the clash was compounded by the fact that power was held not by a transplanted colonial class which could be pushed to relinquish power and return to Europe, but by an indigenous nobility whose survival depended upon retention of state power. The inability of the imperial regime to respond to demands for political reform, land reform, to end the hegemony of the Amhara, and to come to terms with the Eritreans, eroded its popular support in the 1960s and 1970s. As the opposition grew in size and strength, an ageing Haile Selassie proved unable to contain it, and it was the military who stepped into the power void in 1974.

Apart from Eritrean, Somali and other rebels on the periphery, it was the students who led the opposition against the Haile Selassie regime at the centre, as it did later against the Derg. From its inception in the mid-1960s, the student movement had a pan-Ethiopian character, and focused on class rather than ethnic contradictions.

However, the insurgency in Eritrea and elsewhere, the glaring fact of ethnic dominance in the state, and the policy of cultural suppression practised by this state, brought the issue of national self-determination to the fore. Being militant marxists, the students accepted the principle of national self-determination, up to and including secession. At the same time, they believed the overthrow of the imperial and the end of class exploitation and ethnic oppression would remove the grounds for secession (Pateman, 1990).

Under pressure from popular expectations for radical change aroused by the students, the Derg adopted a radical ideology and undertook a fundamental transformation of Ethiopian society. Soviet style marxism-leninism provided the ideological framework the Derg utilised to destroy the old social structure, to force the pace of development, to further centralize state power and the militarize its apparatus. The most crucial element in this process was the 1975 nationalisation of land which destroyed the material basis of the old regime. The Derg also proclaimed an end to ethnic oppression, it decreed the equality of all cultures, promoted the use of other languages and cultures, and entertained the idea of some type of federal structure for Ethiopia. With this in mind, it established the Institute of Nationalities in the mid-1980s, to study the ethnic composition of Ethiopia and to draft a constitutional design for local self-government. It was the first time this prospect was contemplated in Ethiopia, though it was not taken seriously by the Derg.

The Ethiopian military had no intention to weaken the power of the centre, nor to allow meaningful mass participation in the government. In fact, it intensified the policy of centralization and arbitrary rule typical of its predecessor. The Derg thus fought to maintain not only the integrity of the Ethiopian state against strong challenges by Eritrean, Somali, Oromo, Afar and other dissident ethnic groups. It also strove to forge a totally centralized state and, therefore, it refused to share power with either the politically conscious middle classes or the emerging regional and ethnic elites, and ensured that the state retained its predominately Amhara character. As a result, the new regime was almost immediately challenged from many quarters.

Convinced the Derg would not resolve the ethnic problems of the country, or democratise the state, militant Tigrayan students embraced the view that the correct basis for struggle against the regime was not class but national (i.e., ethnic), and it had to be based on the peasantry. It was this conviction they took to their home province where they formed the TPLF in 1975. (Some years later the TPLF acknowledged that emphasising the national question was 'the best tactic to rally the oppressed peoples of Ethiopia in general and that of Tigray in particular; TPLF, 1980:12). Based on the assumption that the primary contradiction that had to be resolved was ethnic oppression, the TPLF concluded that the opposition to the Derg should organize on that basis. The TPLF militants rejected the class based approach of the student movement, and opted to struggle for national self-determination. This approach was to prove very effective – while class approach failed tragically – which was also reflected in the policies the EPRDF government some sixteen years later.

## Ethnic Based Rebellion

While the course of the TPLF's struggle cannot be recounted here (Young, 1997), it is important to emphasise how the Front's struggles, political positions and relationships to other parties during the course of the struggle carried over into the post-Derg period. Soon after launching its struggle in rural Tigray in early 1975, the TPLF fought two rivals in the province. In the west, the Front defeated a much larger force

dominated by members of the former nobility who were fighting to restore the *ancien regime*. In the east the TPLF defeated the superior forces of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP), an organisation of the student movement. While calling for a social revolution, the EPRP looked to the working class for inspiration and was unable to rally support among peasantry whose concerns were framed within a provincial perspective.

By 1979, the TPLF was the only significant opposition movement in Tigray. The lesson it drew from these successes was that nationalism had to be at the forefront of the campaign, along with a programme which for social transformation in the countryside. In the wake of the collapse of the imperial regime, and before the Derg alienated most of the peasantry through its brutality and incompetence, Tigrayan peasants were mobilized in opposition to the military regime. They feared a new form of Amhara domination being imposed upon them, and were convinced, as one peasant put it that, 'only Tigrayans could solve Tigrayan problems'.

Controversy over the Front's direction first broke out in 1976 with the publication of the *Manifesto of the TPLF* and its call for 'the establishment of an independent Republic of Tigray' (1976:24). While this pronouncement was subsequently rejected, the Manifesto's commitment to the principle that all Ethiopia's nationalities have the right to self-determination up to and including the right to independence, was repeatedly affirmed. Moreover, the Manifesto's claim that the national question was the 'best tactic to rally the oppressed peoples of Ethiopia in general and that of Tigray in particular' (Ibid. p. 28) has not only been confirmed by the TPLF's success, but applies to the contradictions at the core of the Ethiopian state.

Crucial to the early development of the TPLF was its relations with the Eritrean nationalists who had launched their struggle against the imperial regime a decade and a half earlier. Based on a shared culture, language and contingent territories, the TPLF gained the support of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) after affirming that Eritrea constituted a colony and thus had the right to independence. While it has never questioned this principle, as the TPLF later challenged the EPLF on a number of issues (Young, 1996:105-120), but the most contentious was the national question. While the EPLF denied the nine nationalities living in Eritrea the right to independence and denied that right to other nationalities in Ethiopia, the TPLF repeatedly asserted the right of all nationalities, in both Eritrea and Ethiopia, to independence. The TPLF position was bitterly resented by the EPLF and was to be a major cause of the EPLF's decision to break relations with the Tigrayans in 1985. Pragmatism and the prospect of victory over the Derg brought the Fronts together again in 1988, but the TPLF did not back down from its views on the rights of nations in either Ethiopia or Eritrea. The founding of the ethnic coalition, the EPRDF, the following year served to again give expression to the TPLF's emphasis on the principle of national mobilization.

With the war against the Derg approaching an end, a conference organized by the United States in London, in May 1991, was attended by leaders of the TPLF, EPLF, OLF (Oromo Liberation Front), and representatives of the Derg, although by the time the conference was actually held, Mengistu had flown to Zimbabwe and the regime was disintegrating. At that meeting, US Under-Secretary of State Herman Cohen proposed the EPRDF, whose troops were at that time on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, enter the city, and set up a transitional government with the participation of the OLF and other groups. This decision caused great anger among TPLF/EPRDF opponents who considered it an act of US betrayal. However, it was almost certainly not the

result of any US-EPRDF collusion, but based on the recognition that the Derg's army had collapsed and the EPRDF was the only force that could ensure stability, an important consideration given the destruction and anarchy that was taking place at that time in Monrovia and Mogasdishu where the Dole and Barré regimes disintegrated.) A further agreement was reached between the EPLF, TPLF, and the OLF to meet in Addis Ababa and prepare a draft document (Charter) according to which Ethiopia would be administered for a transitional period of two years. The success of the EPRDF in defeating the Derg affirmed the correctness of its policy of putting nationality at the forefront of the struggle. With victory in hand, the EPRDF was in a position to implement this policy on an Ethiopia-wide basis.

Shortly after EPRDF's forces entered Addis Ababa, a draft agreement was prepared and accepted by the parties who attended the London meeting, and the EPRDF began talks with a number of groups interested in attending a planned conference in the Ethiopian capital. Significantly, those who were encouraged to participate were predominately ethnic based groups, which either existed earlier or organised immediately prior to the conference (Vaughan, 1994:45-6). The remnants of the student movement, EPRP and Meison, were not invited to attend the conference, and have not been allowed to participate in the political life of the country to this day.

Tightly controlled by the EPRDF, which held a majority of the seats, the conference essentially approved the Charter prepared earlier in negotiations with the OLF; claiming to represent the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, this organization was potentially a major force. The most contentious issue taken up by the conference was the status of Eritrea. In the end it the majority agreed to recognise the right of Eritreans to determine their own future through an internationally supervised referendum to take place after two years. In return, the Eritreans agreed to make Asab a free port for Ethiopia (Ibid. p. 42). There was almost no mention of the EPRDF's plans to restructure the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines. Instead, after approving the right of the country's nationalities to self-determination, up to and including secession. In effect, it was left to the transitional government to empower ethnicity by proclamation (Ibid. p. 52).

## The EPRDF Government and Opposition

After the conference, Meles Zenawi, leader of both the TPLF and EPRDF, became president of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), whose cabinet was dominated by the EPRDF but included representative of the OLF and other ethnic groups. A Council of Representatives was appointed with more or less the same membership as the conference, and comprised thirty-two representatives from the EPRDF, twelve from the OLF, and the rest from a number of other, mainly ethnic-based groups. On 22 July 1991 the Council adopted the Addis Ababa conference Charter as an interim constitution for the Transitional Government of Ethiopia.

Contrary to widespread expectations, the EPRDF did not integrate the Derg's forces into the into the guerilla army led and dominated by fighters of the TPLF. Critics suggested this indicated a less than firm commitment to national unity. TPLF sources maintain this decision was made months earlier, after it was concluded that the new government could not rely on the Derg's army, because it was Soviet trained, was not disciplined and did not respect the people (Mamo, 1995). The intellectual community of Addis Ababa, with its large Amhara contingent, was likewise excluded from positions of responsibility and influence in the new government. Instead, the EPRDF

relied almost entirely upon its own members and apolitical technocrats, something that has not changed in the ensuing five years.

Relations with the OLF, the most important group outside the EPRDF fold, broke down quickly. The main reason was the sponsoring by the EPRDF of a rival Oromo political organization, the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization which proceeded to compete with the OLF in the first elections for regional administrations held in June 1992. Alleging intimidation and other irregularities, the OLF decided to boycott the elections and withdraw from the government.

Afterwards, the OLF drifted into an armed insurrection and was banned from Ethiopia. Relations between these two movements are bedevilled by mutual suspicion. The OLF openly flirted with secession – a mortal threat to the existence of Ethiopia which the EPRDF is unwilling to countenance, its attachment to the principle of self determination notwithstanding. On the other hand, the OLF suspects the new regime represents the continuation of Abyssinian hegemony, this time by Tigrayans, regards the devolution scheme as a ploy.

Opposition also came from the other end of the political spectrum from those who regarded the ethnic policy was designed to dismember the Ethiopian state. This was the view of the All-Amhara Peoples Organization (AAPO), an opposition party which sought to rally the former dominant ethnic group. A number of other ethnic opposition parties were organized to compete with those sponsored by the EPRDF. Several minuscule factions abroad, especially in the United States raised a barrage of propaganda against the regime in Ethiopia. At home, there were struggles within the state which pit Amhara and, to a lesser extent, Oromo functionaries, against their Tigrayan political masters and appointees. Gradually, the EPRDF became more restrained about pursuing the kind of reforms to the central state which raised the ire of bureaucrats, and Tigrayans could be heard complaining that the government had not done enough to end Amhara domination of state structures. Generally the pubic bureaucracy remains, as it was under the Derg, deeply conservative, resistant to change, preoccupied with national security, and seriously in need of reform.

Recently released figures from the Federal Civil Service Commission show some 57 per cent of federal government employees are Amhara, 14 per cent Oromo, and 12 per cent Tigrayan (*Ethiopian Herald*, 8 April 1996). Apart from indicating the continuing importance of the Amhara as state functionaries, these figures point to the continuing subordinate position of the Oromo who constitute more than a third of Ethiopia's population, a situation that cannot continue indefinitely if the EPRDF's objective of creating a state that broadly represents all Ethiopians, is to be realised.

While Ethiopian peasants may remain sceptical of the new regime, their concerns have diminished with the return of peace, the end of forced conscription, liberalizaton of trade agricultural produce and, until recently, very low taxes. Indeed, the low levels of peasant taxation seemed designed to win peasant support for the government and to deny the urban opposition a rural base. On the other hand, this meant the government had few resources with which to administer in the countryside. It is remembered that the Derg initially also reduced the taxes of peasants, but then drove peasants to the brink of starvation with its demands. Recently, the EPRDF introduced price increases on fertilisers, government housing and stores, and petrol, and also restricted businessmen access to hard currency. In response, tradesmen staged mass demonstrations in the cities in October 1996.

The first step in the process of power devolution was the 1992 regional elections. The first of the kind, they were not without blemish, but were generally regarded as the best that could be expected under the circumstances (Amnesty International, 1995). They were followed in 1994 with elections to the Constituent Assembly which was to ratify the new constitution. This paved the way for the national elections on 7 May 1995. As in the earlier, given the absence of most major opposition groups, it produced a sweeping victory for the EPRDF.As a result of this election in the 547 seat Council of People's Representatives the EPRDF holds 493. At the time of the 1995 elections the EPRDF components included the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) which was previously the EPDM, OPDO, and the Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDF). There was no shortage of complaints against the conduct of the elections, yet foreign observers declared them valid.

Meles Zenawi became Prime Minister, Dr. Negaso Gidada, an Oromo, assumed the largely ceremonial role of State President, and Tamrat Layne, an Amhara, became Deputy Prime Minister and also Minister of Defence. Meles and Seyoum Mesfin, who retained his position as Minister of Foreign Affairs, were the only Tigrayans among the seventeen ministers, although there is little doubt that the TPLF remains the most dominant force in the government. To reflect the new constitutional arrangements, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) was officially proclaimed on 24 August 1995 by the federal legislature, the Council of People's Representatives.

Ethnic federalism is the EPRDF's answer to the problem of state centralism and Amhara domination, while Tigray is the prototype for local administration. Throughout the revolution, the TPLF consistently linked the struggle against the Amhara-dominated state and for Tigrayan national self-determination, with the liberation of all Ethiopia's nationalities. The Front's opposition to multinational parties, its promotion of ethnic-based movements, and formation of the EPRDF, are all designed to reinforce this perspective, to achieve these ends, and create an Ethiopian state radically different than that which existed for the past one hundred years under the feudal regimes and the Derg.

While the TPLF's view of Ethiopian history is open to dispute, it is this interpretation and the Front's experience gained in Tigray during sixteen years of revolutionary war that forms the basis of the EPRDF's constitutional agenda. Two other factors are important. The first is the conviction that success in the battlefield confirmed the superiority of the Front's political precepts. Second, it is clear that the best means for the TPLF to retain a leading position in a Ethiopia, where Tigrayans constitute a small proportion of the country's population, is to maintain an ethnic-based coalition with elements of the numerically superior Oromo and the historically dominant Amhara. This is best achieved in a state where power is diffused to ethnic based administrations in the regions.

The fact that the Front assumed power in a period when the centralised administrative states of the socialist bloc were collapsing, undoubtedly enhanced this process and gave it a measure of legitimacy. As Clapham noted (1988:229),

> *throughout the former socialist world there is a recognition that, 'the state hierarchy cannot achieve its basic goals of national unity and food self-sufficiency because success requires a devolution of decision making ... which challenges the leninist model of the all-powerful party-state.*

The EPRDF model of devolution is not without its leninist elements, since it involves a strong vanguard party which reaches from the executive in the national capital down to the smallest of villages. Thus, elected representatives at the regional level often appear more as functionaries of the national government and the EPRDF, rather than genuine representatives of local peoples. Crucially, however, these local officials are predominately natives to the area, and no longer do Ethiopia's non-Amhara peoples have aliens administering their local affairs, and no longer have to speak Amharigna to make themselves heard by their governors.

It remains to be seen whether devolution of powers to the regions will represent real decentralisation of power, or simply deconcentration, with the national government still retaining dominant power, irrespective of constitutional provisions. The problem is further compounded by the fact that the EPRDF in its party guise has assumed control of assets and functions formerly held by the state, notably in the economic sphere. While the EPRDF in the state is busily shedding enterprises acquired or created by the Derg, its agents and associates are in turn purchasing and managing these same assets.

This policy, which to some extent mirrors current developments in Eritrea, preserves a measure of state control over resources, in a fashion that is indirect and, formally at least, outside the state structure; thus far, it has escaped international criticism. It provides a major source of income for the Front, and utilises its corps of talented individuals, particularly TPLF cadres forced to leave positions of leadership in government as a result of efforts to increase non-Tigrayan representation. Last, it creates a source of employment for the Front's supporters. Taking advantage of the absence of effective opposition, and a lack of tradition of voluntary organisation autonomous of the state, EPRDF power has been further reinforced through the growth of a media controlled by the state and the party. On the other hand, the budding free press, almost unanimously hostile to the regime, has drawn harsh penalties for its inexperience and excessive zeal.

While the EPRDF remains committed to the devolution of state power, the success of regional administration, apart from Tigray, is uncertain. Unlike the TPLF, which has a base of dedicated and talented party personnel to draw upon at both the centre and regional and local levels of government, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), its main partner in the EPRDF, is struggling to establish itself against the opposition in urban areas and among intellectuals in particular. It does appear to be gaining some ground among the peasants in the Amhara territory. The shortage of skilled personnel in the regions is being addressed with the establishment of a Civil Service College in Addis Ababa devoted entirely to upgrading the qualifications of regional officialdom.

Raising administrative skill levels may prove easier than gaining legitimacy for the non-ethnic affiliates of the EPRDF which, with the exception of ANDM, were established very late in the day and lack strong bases of support in their communities. The Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) is of particular concern. Many Oromo regard it as a puppet of the EPRDF regime, and corrupt in the bargain. A new Oromo party, the Oromo National Congress, was formed recently to oppose both the OPDO's subservience to the central government and the OLF advocacy of an independent Oromia. The troubles of the OPDO are not unique. Other regions, the Somali, Afar, and Beni Shangul among them, are paralysed by political infighting and administrative chaos.

The EPRDF government has also moved to reduce the role of the state in the economy; although as noted, this may in some cases be a slight of hand, as the party moves into areas the state abandons. In any case, these efforts meshed closely with the proscriptions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As a result, the new government won the support in quarters that might have been suspicious of revolutionaries who had only recently proclaimed their admiration for Albanian socialism. The conversion of economic orthodoxy by a party with marxist-leninist traditions is not as paradoxical as it might appear. The EPRDF took over a state whose existence was always based on the exploitation of the peasants. In the latter period of the Derg's rule this assumed extreme forms, with a network of state corporations preying on the peasantry. Ethiopian peasants have long looked upon the state as a major cause of their poverty, and had no regrets when the new government dismantled this oppressive apparatus.

While structural adjustment of Ethiopia's heavily statist economy has thus far imposed few costs on the majority of the country's peoples who are peasants, it has – as elsewhere in Africa – caused dislocation, unemployment, a higher cost of living, and growing discontent in the cities and towns where the EPRDF has in any case limited support. The regime's opponents failed to exploit this discontent and remained fixed on non-economic issues such as the loss of Eritrea, the alleged break up of Ethiopia, and the question of democracy.

The strength of the EPRDF's commitment to democracy is by no means clear. From the earliest days in Tigray, the TPLF established a wide range of elected councils and mass associations. In Tigray, these proved highly effective in mobilising peasants and giving them a voice in local affairs. Nevertheless, while free and open discussion is encouraged, opposition against the TPLF is actively discouraged. The effectiveness of local governments outside Tigray is much less clear and deserves study.

Perhaps the most noteworthy TPLF populist creation has been *gim gima,* which literally means evaluation. It is an institution of marxist-leninist origins designed to evaluate the performance of collective entities, individuals, and programmes through debate in open forums. Developed in the army, and later introduced into the mass associations, *gim gima* proved highly successful at not only increasing the effectiveness of these organisations, but also in making the leaders accountable to their followers, and closely binding the TPLF to the people. *Gim gima* was subsequently introduced into the component elements of the EPRDF, and since 1991 has spread to institutions throughout the country. As with other TPLF initiatives, the effectiveness of *gim gima* outside Tigray, and the extent it might be manipulated to further the interests of various elite groups, is not known. *Gim gima* is also not free of human rights abuses. In Tigray, it is being revised to adapt it to the changed conditions of peace, and also to make it effective in the urban areas where its history and acceptance by the population is much shorter.

For fourteen years (1975-1989), the TPLF was restricted to the countryside, and had little experience of working in urban areas. Subsequently, it did not develop an institutional base for urban administration. Local government in the towns and cities of Ethiopia is carried out through the system of district councils created by the Derg and reformed by the EPRDF. While some opposition and independent candidates won seats in these councils in recent elections in Addis Ababa and other towns, EPRDF control remains overwhelming, and quite at variance with limited support in the urban sector. The governing party in turn acknowledges its lack of urban support,

and defines itself as a peasant party, making it clear that its energies are directed at the countryside. This rural focus is undoubtedly correct in a country where the overwhelming population lives and works in the countryside. Nonetheless, it is questionable how long the EPRDF can disregard the townspeople.

Despite harassment, the opposition newspapers provide critical comment on government policies and the issues of the day. However, to a large degree they operate in a vacuum, because so little is known about the inner workings of the government. Whether it is the product of Ethiopia's feudal traditions, or the result of a government which, after five years in power, still does not feel secure in its capital city, the EPRDF leadership appears remote, and has little interaction beyond a select group of political allies, most of whom are Tigrayan. The EPRDF presides over what is still an authoritarian state, which it shows less interest in reforming than was the case during its first years in power. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that, with some exceptions, Ethiopians do not live in fear; their objections and opposition to the government are freely expressed verbally and in street demonstrations, and few would deny that political conditions have improved enormously since the Derg years. Respect for human rights was never a priority in Ethiopia, and it is perhaps unrealistic to expect a dramatic change in such a short time. For that very same reason, there is need for constant vigilance to ensure that the arrogant dismissal of human rights characteristic of the EPRDF's predecessors does not revisit the country.

## Conclusion

The EPRDF challenge to the supremacy of the centralized state and its role in the economy, must be seen in the context of the Horn of Africa, where for more than thirty years ethnic based opposition to the state has been the cause of enormous disruption and loss of life and property. Policies designed to increase the authority of centralized states by weakening ethnic identities and encouraging economic development have a long history in the Horn. Continuing problems of ethnic conflict and economic stagnation made clear the failure of these approaches and the theories on which they are based.

This failure derives from the mistaken notions that state centralisation can overcome the divisiveness of ethnicity, and economic development can take place without confronting the political and structural problems of the state and its relationship with ethnic minorities. Contrary to these notions, state centralisation fosters ethnic conflict, as the example of Ethiopia demonstrates, because as Brass has argued, ethnicity is a product of competition between ethnic elites for state power, and state centralisation encourages alienated elites to raise ethnic demands (Brass, 1991:217).

It is clear that patterns of development that have favoured some groups and regions at the expense of others have made the state, as the arbitrator over the distribution of scarce resources, the focus of endemic political conflict between competing ethnic groups in the Horn (Markakis, 1994:217). Indeed, liberation movements which have come to power in recent years in Uganda, Eritrea, and Ethiopia were all led by marginalised ethnic elites who mobilised peasantries in opposition to hegemonic states. Having captured state power, these liberation movements confront the relationship between the state and its ethnic communities in very different ways. The Ugandans and Eritreans are trying to overcome ethnic-based struggles for power and resources by disallowing political expression of ethnicity and attempting to channel ethnic sentiments along cultural lines.

Unique in the Horn and Africa, the EPRDF holds ethno-nationalism cannot be restricted to the cultural sphere, and the only means to ensure that conflicts over state power do not produce secessionist movements is to grant ethnic communities full political rights. Consistent with this conviction, it has facilitated the separation of Eritrea, renounced long-held Ethiopian policies based on state centralization, has proceeded with the devolution of powers to the regions, and through its new constitution has granted the regions the right to peacefully and leave the federation. It is a highly innovative and even daring approach, and the object of much criticism by nationalist who argue it will bring about the destruction of Ethiopia. However, in the absence of a strong opposition with convincing alternative policies, the government's approach must be considered the only viable one at present, although whether it will indeed prove effective remains to be seen.

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## Endnotes

1. 'The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia' (unofficial English translation from the Amharic original), Addis Ababa, 8 December 1994, p. 18-19. Nation, nationality or people are defined in the constitution as 'a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief (*sic.*) in a common or related identities, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable, contiguous territory.'

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