

The perils of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism

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1. Introduction

It has now been a little over fifteen years since a unique federal state structure was adopted in Ethiopia pursuant to the 1994 Constitution. There has not been any change of government since then and the system has been in operation with the blessing and support of its iron clad progenitor-the TPLF (Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front) led coalition of junior partners under the umbrella of the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front). The real strength of any system of government is to be judged based on the system surviving its partisan creators and enforcers. Can we say with certainty that this will be the case- come free and fair election which sees this coalition lose power? Some might even ask the ominous question whether Ethiopia itself, as we know it today, will survive the demise of the TPLF/EPRDF Coalition. The latter is a very difficult question to which no one without crystal balls can give a definitive answer. Instead I argue that the current form of Federalism has to be reformed fundamentally if it is to survive its current enforcers and transcend partisan politics of the day and serve the Ethiopian people. This subject has been written on by many scholars and compatriots over the years. However, it is important to not let a weed grow on this beaten track. At the outset, I would like to beg your indulgence reading this long note, which was originally intended to be only few pages long. We have a Frankenstein on our hands!

Let us first dispel the chimera that Federalism was introduced in to Ethiopia for the first time by the EPRDF. We all may have different views of what Ethiopia's geographical boundary had been over the last three or so millennia of its recorded history. It is not necessary for all of us to agree on this to make a point, which I am going to. But one thing is true though, i.e. whether it was during the Axumites; the Zagwes; medieval Abyssinia or in the territories of the various nations annexed in to Abyssinia-there had always been a notion of Federalism or that of shared rule between the centre and its constituent territories. Ethiopian emperors did not assume the title of "King of Kings" without a reason. The occasional incursions of Abyssinian medieval kings in to independent kingdoms in the South and East bordering their empires never fully stripped the powers of the local rulers. This means regional autonomy has always been a feature of Ethiopian system of government. Even Emperor Minilik who is known for his empire expansion role and

annexation of tribes and nations bordering his traditional boundaries, did leave some measure of self-rule to local kings who recognized him as their emperor e.g. Jimma Abbajifar and Kingdoms in Wollega This regional autonomy, however, was not accompanied by individual rights and freedoms for the subjects of these kingdoms, with the notable exception of the abolition of slavery.

The last nail in the coffin of regional autonomy was Haileselassie's centralization policies which continued unabated during the military rule of the Derg. One can conclude that EPRDF's federal system of government is a mere reversal of unitarism which took hold during the last two governments. However, many critics would point out that such reversal has been a matter of form but not of substance. There is merit in this criticism.

Thus, there is no doubt that the notion of regional autonomy is a desirable form of government for a large and diverse country like ours as well as to hasten the country's economic development. The problem is not with the notion itself but with shortcomings in its design and the assumptions underlying the system. These shortcomings and assumptions combined with incompetent implementation results in making the end product a poisoned chalice. I will discuss, admittedly only partly, these short-comings and misguided assumptions in the following sections. This is like merely scratching the surface of our constitutional ailment.

2. Lack of full-hearted commitment to the project of a new federal Ethiopia

Commitment to a federalism project has to be full-hearted. I do not think that the makers of the constitution were fully committed to the modern federal Ethiopia project. The Constitution is based on the assumption that if this daring experiment succeeds, that is fine, if not we can pack up the willing pieces and move on and establish our independent fragmented states until the next bus stop. One either wants to be with Ethiopia or not, and that has to come out loud and clear in the constitution. It is important to look at the history of the TPLF to understand this half-hearted modern federal Ethiopia project. It is possible that political parties change their views over time and TPLF might have shifted its position on paper, but this shift has not been decisive and its intermittent nationalism is viewed suspiciously.

If you are wondering about my personal commitment, since I am questioning the motives of others, I can tell you point blank that, we the peoples of Ethiopia have special bonds and I will definitely give a priority to living together so long as we are ready and able to accommodate each other, which I think we can. After all, it is the relationships, the bonds and mutual

understanding which matters not the artificial notion of statehood. In my existence for a little over three decades, my life has been touched by people from all corners of the country and I have never had anybody come up to my face and disrespect me personally on account of who I am. I have a very fond memory of my neighbors in my little cosmopolitan hometown named Gore (which even included an Arab), classmates and colleagues who come from various ethnicities. I have, therefore, no axe to grind and will not let the worldview of others determine how I should relate to people I view as my compatriots. We can ignore the very few bad apples, who neither have the courtesy nor the foresight to recognize and acknowledge the historical mistakes committed by successive Ethiopian regimes. In short, my aspirations, my struggles with power, my identity as an Oromo human being would be the same whether I lived in independent Oromiya, in Ethiopia or in association with Sudan or Kenya. That said, I will not associate with anyone or entity which wants to trample on my identity. I will be the judge of that and will not accept to be dictated. I will not do to others what I do not want others do to me. This is my simple rule of co-existence. These views will inform my activities if I ever choose to get involved with any political group.

3. Lack of unwavering commitment to human rights and rule of law to counter the appeal of secession

Those who promote ethnic federalism must make sure that human rights are respected to the fullest. This is because federalism of the type we are practicing is competing with the very tantalizing prospect of secession. In other words, the level of respect for human rights and rule of law has to be strong enough to counter the new passion for nationalism made possible due to the organization of regional states along ethnic lines. Gradual improvement may not be the answer, since no one knows when nationalism strikes hard thereby pushing the federation to the brink. Let us be honest, we all are under a veil of ignorance as to what the future brings should TPLF lose power even for a short period of time.

4. Too big a regional state whose departure can threaten the viability of the federation

When a new federalism is designed from a scratch, especially of the ethnic federation type, no member of the Federation should be allowed to be so big so as to threaten the viability of the whole Federation. This problem is afflicting even mature federations such as the one in Belgium, where the most prosperous Dutch speaking part has upped its intransigence to the extent of paralyzing the government and threatening the very existence of the country. It has not always been like this since in the past the French speaking part was more powerful. If this is happening

at the very heart of the European Union, what guarantees do we have, here in Africa, with lesser protection of human rights and respect for the rule of law?

I am not unfairly singling out larger states such as Oromiya and Amhara regional states. As I pointed out we are either fully committed to federalism or not. The best way of creating a new independent state is not through the back door of ethnic federalism as in Former Yugoslavia or the USSR. Today the Amhara region might be perceived to be pro Ethiopia, but we do not know what tomorrow brings. Just assume that, the regional state discovers that it sits on one of the most lucrative natural resources, such as a huge oil deposit that could last for generations, and then wait and see if the state would want to continue to put up with and subsidize other whining members of the federation which did not turn out to be as lucky.

Constitution is for generations and we cannot slice and dice States every now and then causing further chaos. As things stand now, it seems to me that, we are simply grooming such big states for independence, and let me point out too what some people might consider a sacrilege. Before Minilik there were no unified independent Amhara, Tigray or Oromo states. All we had were semi autonomous Wag, Begemder, Yeju, Gojjam, Showa, Agame, Axum, Temben, Raya, the five Gibe states, Qeleem, Wallagaa, Borana, Harrar, various gadaa led states in central and south oromiya etc., not to mention others such as Kaffaa, Hadiyaa, or Wolayita, etc... Some of them were even at war with each other despite speaking the same language, for example, the Muslim and non-Muslim Gibe States. If we want to go back to the pre-Minilik era, which ones do we consider the original position of the current constituents of the federation? do we get Amhara, Oromo and Tigray, the so called amalgam of Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional state? Why then engage in a new form of national engineering? More on this below, in connection with the discussion of the issue of the origin of the issue of the “National Question”. Of course, all these should not be taken as a license to reorganize them haphazardly without taking their wishes in to account.

5. The Constitutional adoption process was not fully consultative

Constitution is a holy scripture of federations, indeed for any country, except that it is made by humans for humans. A document of such significance has to be carefully deliberated upon and has to get a near unanimous support of its inhabitants and needs to adapt to changed circumstances. Unfortunately, the FDRE Constitution of 1994 was adopted in haste without getting the backing of the cross-section of the population and political groups. As a result, it is largely viewed as a political program of the EPRDF and a handful of other armed groups

repackaged as a constitution. Most of the political rancor of the past two decades could have been avoided if the Constitution was adopted with the full backing of the Ethiopian people and its sidelined political groups. It is hardly possible to expect such document to command the obedience of those who were sidelined when the Constitution was adopted. EPRDF has not done any fence mending job since its adoption to overcome this fatal blow to the legitimacy of the constitution. It is intransigent as ever and too quick to charge those who challenge the constitution with treason, and yet continues to flagrantly violate the terms of its own constitution with impunity. It does not help to venerate the constitution when it serves the interests of the EPRDF only. This helps to multiply the number of people who hold the constitution in contempt.

6. The toxicity of ethnicity as an organizing principle

This is a radical departure from the past and it is the most daring political experiment attempted anywhere in the world in recent decades. Not only does the constitution recognize (group) identity rights of various ethnicities, which is the right thing to do, but it moves in to the uncharted territory by putting them at the pinnacle of government power in their respective regions and at the federal level. In the constitutional speak, the Nations, Nationalities and People are the Sovereign. I don't think that there is any major dispute in this day and time as to the desirability of recognizing identity (group) rights of ethnic communities as human rights, be it nationally or internationally. The problem is when ethnicity becomes a *raison d'être* for everything. Glorifying ethnicity is toxic and a very volatile matter which could be exploited by agitators and need not have such an overriding place in cosmopolitan societies. When Ethiopia sheds its agrarian character for a cosmopolitan one, with strong economic activity in all its corners, ethnicity can only serve as an unnecessary distraction. Also in difficult economic times, ethnicity will readily serve as an escape route. One should get a lesson from an overwhelming defeat which EPRDF was handed during the 2005 election in the cities and the opposition to its current kind of federalism in such places. These parties ran on the platform of repealing certain provisions of the current constitution. Cities are nothing but indications of what the country would look like in the future.

One proposal often made to diffuse this situation is to break up the existing regional states geographically and organize them in a manner which reflects settlement pattern, existence of one economic community etc...The credibility of such proposals is, however, put in to question due to the fact that its protagonists are figures nostalgic of unitary Ethiopia, which had a history of marginalization of most of its ethnic communities. Furthermore, there has not been any clear articulation of whether regional states so broken down will or will not continue to enjoy the right

to choose their working language based on a free and fair vote of their inhabitants. For this debate to progress and mature, protagonists of unitarism must swallow a bitter pill, accept the fact that the genie is out of the bottle and return to the table with a view to reforming the existing federal arrangement. As is being witnessed, EPRDF is using the uncompromising attitude of unitarists as an example of how those with alternative views are apologists of the bygone era and do not have the best interests of ethnic communities at heart.

7. The elephant in the house: people with mixed ancestry

Now that we have ethnicity as an overriding concept, the constitution, however, utterly failed to take notice of one large group of Ethiopians. These are people with mixed ancestry, those who are thorn between their various identities and simply prefer to identify themselves as Ethiopians. There are many other, who for various reasons, want to be first recognized as Ethiopians suppressing their ethnic identity. We do not even have a statistics on the number of people who prefer to simply identify themselves as Ethiopians or simply feel unease about speaking about their ethnic identity. I won't be surprised if their number is so great as to put them among one of the large group of people in the country.

It is, of course, unwise and impractical to carve up a separate identity akin to ethnicity for such group of people so as to fit them in to the constitution as was the case in Apartheid South Africa in regards to the colored people with mixed white and black ancestry. I am putting the spotlight on people of this category to simply show that, the Constitution, even in its own terms, had failed to address the interests of such category of people. People with such background rightly feel anxious and excluded from the new mantra of the sovereign nation, nationalities and peoples.

8. Where does ethnicity stop?

The trouble next door in Somalia is sufficient to convince anyone that playing with ethnicity is like opening Pandora's Box. Clan, sub-clan, district, religious and denomination divisions will be the next issues that will occupy the space vacated by ethnicity. For example, in a hypothetical Oromiya, I will start worrying about the balance of power between Muslims and Christians and how they are going to run the country. I will be worried if people from my part of the country are not adequately represented at the centre. It does not mean that we do not have such problems at the moment but we tend to keep our eye on the bigger ball, just for now.

Ethnicity may appear tantalizing for marginalized ethnic groups in the short run, but the new frame of thinking will most likely activate or exaggerate other existing differences between people belonging to the same ethnic group. We are definitely better off focusing on the big picture than what makes us different. It is not without reason that the most tolerant people in the world are found in countries that are so diverse. The strength of the United States of America lies in its diversity although it had come a long way recognizing and respecting its different identities.

9. It is all about opportunities and being left out, isn't it?

It is an alarming experience when a citizen of a country feels or perceives that he is unwelcome to another part of the country or cannot partake in the economic and political affairs of that part of the country where he was born and bred; or even when he feels entitled to be anywhere by virtue of being a citizen but cannot. The Constitution does not exclude them literally but created a suitable condition for an exclusion to take place. One can readily blame the affected person for not putting an effort in to learning the language of the region but that cannot be a satisfactory answer in Ethiopian context.

Over the past two decades, the standing of the Amharic language, the lingua franca, is deteriorating and a decade or so down the line, if not already, there will be a new generation of Ethiopians who will not be able to communicate with each other due to the neglect of not only Amharic, but also due to failure to elevate other major languages such as Oromiffa as the Federal government's working language and as an optional second language in other regional states. Opportunities to learn languages of their choice should be provided for those who feel alienated because of language policies. Both the Federal and Regional Governments must make it their responsibility to protect ethnic minorities within their boundaries and provide them with a safe and fulfilling environment for them and their families.

Even Stalin who discussed the 'National Question' including the right to secede in 1913 in that regard wrote: a "a state law based on complete democratization of the country is required, prohibiting all national privileges without exception and every kind of disability or restriction on the rights of national minorities." But we have so far failed to democratize the country, reign in a privilege accorded to natives to the exclusion of the 'outsiders', and calm the nerves of vulnerable minorities in the regional states.

10. The federal geographical division is not principled

The Constitution also failed to exercise even-handedness in its elevation of some ethnic groups in to regional statehood by leaving equally (if not more) entitled ethnic groups in the cold. Number clearly was not a factor since we have one of the smallest, Harari as a state, not the Woliya or Sidama who are much larger in number and size. Nor historical vulnerability a factor, for we see the people of Agew swallowed up by the Amhara and Tigray regional States. They have equal moral claim to statehood as that of the Harari. I cannot even understand the principle behind lumping about 45 ethnic groups in to one regional state in the South. They have every reason to be aggrieved by this lack of even-handedness.

11. The right to secede

Another wedge issue is the right to secede by the regional states contained in Art 39 of the Constitution. This is a rather unusual and corrupted right plucked out of context from Stalinist thought and put in to the Ethiopian Constitution. If Stalin was alive he would have scoffed at the intellectual fathers of the Ethiopian constitution for their subversion or perhaps misunderstanding of his writings. I say out of context because Stalin and Lenin conceived the issue of national question and secession in the context of colonial and capitalist domination. It was designed as a tool to overthrow the bourgeois and the right to secede is subordinate to the cause of proletariat revolution. These conditions are clearly absent in the Ethiopian context. It is in fact baffling that this had to come following the overthrow of an openly Marxist-Leninist regime of Mengistu Hailemariam by stealth Stalinists. Stalin believed that a 'nation' which is a definite community of people "is not racial, nor is it tribal," but a "historically constituted community of people." Citing an example, he says, "The modern Italian nation was formed from Romans, Teutons, Etruscans, Greeks, Arabs, and so forth. The French nation was formed from Gauls, Romans, Britons, Teutons, and so on. The same must be said of the British, the Germans and others, who were formed into nations from people of diverse races and tribes." [Marxism and the National Question, Stalin, 1913]. Thus, according to Stalin, "a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." He excludes Russia, his native Georgia in it early stage from nationhood. If one strictly applies Stalin's Nation theory, one would be hard-pressed to find an Ethiopian ethnic group that fulfills all the requirements, such as, the existence of "an economic life or economic cohesion" between them at the time of the adoption of the constitution or even before Minilik. Was there an economic cohesion between Begemidir and Showa or between Borena and Jimma? or even between Raya and Adowa, except that they spoke the same language? Even among the fairly small group such as the Tigreans, isn't the pan-Tigrean consciousness a creation of the elites than the ordinary folks? There is the more

pronounced Axum, Adowa, Agame, Temben identity before that of a Tigrean. This has nothing to do with respecting the identity rights of any group regardless of whether such group belongs to one nation instead of the other, because it is possible for people speaking the same language to belong to different nations or countries, unless we are engaging in an artificial nation building. But is it worth the effort to engage in such grandiose national engineering by amplifying what makes groups different from each other instead of focusing on their common interest and aspirations?

The constitution does not even define who Nations, Nationalities and Peoples are, so it seems out of an attempt to escape from questions that arise as to the appropriateness of such definitions and their applications to particular ethnic groups. It instead chose a catch-all-definition of what these three terms mean collectively (art. 39(5)). I am as confused as the drafters of the constitution.

Considering my previous argument about commitment to the project of a modern federal Ethiopia, what purpose does it serve to include such a wedge issue provision in the Constitution? Unfortunately, one has to again look at the ulterior motives of the intellectual fathers of the constitution instead of a long term purpose it was intended to serve. Personally, I fail to accept the argument that it was included to guarantee freedom and solidify voluntary union. Therefore, unless it is intended for use by the TPLF to allow its Tigray province to secede as it professed to do so in its Greater Tigray Manifesto of 1976, I do not see any long term significance. If Tigray goes, it is unlikely that Ethiopia would be able to stop secession by any of the remaining regional states. On the other hand, if TPLF leaders have a change of heart and see their future with the rest of Ethiopia, it is equally unlikely that they will allow others to secede as long as the power balance remains in TPLF's favor. Until then, Ethiopians will unnecessarily continue fighting in favor of or against a constitutional right to secede, a provision which is superfluous and should not have been included in the first place.

Contrary to the claims of the TPLF/EPRDF, this right will do nothing to advance Federalism. It is anathema to the very idea of Federalism, an arrangement which was introduced in the first place to create conditions of mutual trust and voluntary union. The choice of federalism is a compromise already. One can only see the purpose of such arrangement as one intended to groom members of the federation for eventual statehood. Unlike the coming together of independent states, for example in the United States, the members of the Federation in Ethiopia have not come together out of their complete free will. Contrary to what the constitution says, there is too much appeal in becoming independent, especially for those regional states which are large, resource rich and can become a viable state without any difficulty.

It is amusing how Stalin aptly observed in 1913 on how cultural autonomy superimposed on federalism could lead to separatism. He wrote: “One may or may not dispute the existence of a logical connection between organizational federalism and cultural-national autonomy. But one cannot dispute the fact that the latter creates an atmosphere favouring unlimited federalism, developing into complete rupture, into separatism.” This according to him is inevitably because of the “nationalist atmosphere which is naturally generated by cultural-national autonomy.” It seems that our leaders introduced this daring experiment without understanding him. Who would have thought that one can find such an apt observation in Stalin’s own work?

12. Lack of unifying federal institutions and civil societies

Granted that we want to consolidate the kind of federalism we have and in concurrence to the requisite reform recommended, there is a need for considering certain elements lacking in the constitutional architecture. The underlying theme to the opposition of the current federal arrangement is the decimation of the hitherto strong unifying sentiment prevalent in state institutions and structures. The constitutional design has not helped in countering that. Let us look at some of these.

- A) The presidency-** Ethiopia has for the first time adopted a prime minister led executive government and parliamentarian system. This is a rarity in Africa, which is accustomed to a directly elected (rigged election or otherwise) strong President as the head of state. The head of state in Ethiopia is the President, but it is one of the most powerless ceremonial presidencies anywhere in the world. He is elected by the Parliament just like the Prime Minister and does not have any meaningful power to speak of. Thus, neither the President nor the Prime Minister (naturally) comes to office through a nation-wide election by the electorate. They are not unifying figures as a matter of institutional design. In some parliamentarian and federal systems like Canada and Australia, there is at least the institution of the monarchy that plays a unifying role because of their historical tradition. In India, the President enjoys considerable power compared to his Ethiopian counterpart. It is hard to figure out why such design, as opposed to the most common models, was chosen except that it was perhaps tailor made to cater to the short term power-jockeying needs of the senior partner of the governing coalition. Presidency normally has term limits, but not that of the premiership. It is easy and in accordance with an international standard for a prime minister to run the government as long as ‘the ruling party’ in parliament elects him. That serves the TPLF very well.

Added to this institutional distance, it is regrettable that the Ethiopian Prime Minister had for the last two decades not attempted to mingle with the public and establish a personal rapport with citizens. Yes, he might have zoomed in to some villages by his helicopters from time to time, for the rest of us, our only knowledge of him has been through his carefully choreographed TV interviews and his appearances at the parliament. His detachment from the public is so grave that I am tempted to remark that, even Rudolph Graziani, who was the colonial administrator of Mussolini in occupied Ethiopia must have felt more at home in Addis Ababa than our current prime minister! Surely, I cannot be expected to relate to him as he is too far away from me and the little man.

B) Unifying language- the existence of a unifying language is important for fostering unity, nation building and for facilitating economic activities as discussed above.

C) Lack of strong nationwide trade unions, professional organizations and civil societies

It is no surprise that nationwide civil societies, trade unions and professional organizations are practically non-existent in today's Ethiopia thereby arresting the advancement of the rights of their members and that of the community in general. It takes a long time for regional independent civil societies to emerge. They also operate under very difficult environment compared to their federal counterparts; and even if they have a space to operate, they tend to look at issues from the narrow perspective of their regional interest. In the process the whole suffers. It is a classic divide and rule system in operation under the guise of federalism. The Federal Government, which is given too many powers under the constitution, can do anything it pleases without suffering the consequences. The war waged against the former Federation of Ethiopian Labour Union and that of Teachers Association is an important example. In the past two decades it has been rare to find workers or professionals coming from different regional states to rally in solidarity for a common cause. Splitting of trade unions according to nationality or ethnicity as was recognized by Stalin was a cause for aggravated national friction, disorganization and demoralization. Such is the state of our trade unions, professional organization and civil societies. As you can see already, one can simply quote from the communists' great playbook, which the young communists must have read from pages to pages, to show how wrong they got it.

13. Lack of impartial arbiter of constitutional disputes

Ethiopia also made an unusual decision of not installing its judicial branch as the arbiter of its constitutional disputes. Instead it has the House of Federation (HOF)- an unequal conjoined twin to the House of Peoples Representatives, as the penultimate interpreter of constitutional disputes. This is an ideologically driven, communist to be exact, choice which rests on the assumption that the constitution is a pact between 'nations', 'nationalities' and 'peoples' of Ethiopia and it is the representatives of these entities and not the judiciary which should interpret it. This assumption forms the backbone of the apathy of the regime towards the judicial branch.

The HOF is supposed to be the upper house of parliament composed of representatives of nations and nationalities who may be elected or appointed by regional states. HOF is not involved in law making thereby distinguishing it from the likes of the United States Senate. Each ethnic group will have one representative in the HOF with one more for each 1 million additional population. It is not created to look after States rights per se, and the bigger the ethnic group is, the more representatives it will have in the HOF. This does not inspire the feeling of equality among member states of the Federation. Just as in the House of Peoples Representatives (the parliament) major ethnic groups can make decisions to the detriment of the smaller regional states. There is no check on their power, considering that it is this body that sets budget subsidy formula for budgetary allocation by the federal government to the regional states.

Even if the HOF is the best body to look after ethnic interests, it cannot be an impartial guardian of individual human rights. At the end of the day ethnic groups are composed of individuals. There are also instances where ethnic rights may conflict with individual rights and the HOF should be excluded from being a judge in its own cause as a matter of elementary principle of natural justice. The only role an institution of this kind should be allowed to have is only to mediate and seek resolution to inter-state disputes.

14. Nations, Nationalities and Peoples are happy. What about individuals?

EPRDF paints a picture of a very happy and grateful 'nations', 'nationalities' and 'peoples' it liberated. In a manner reminiscent of happy creatures in Jehovah Witnesses publications and propaganda leaflets from North Korea, EPRDF propagandists effusively tell us daily of the strides achieved in protecting ethnic rights as if they are some mythical entities not composed of individuals. I have no problem with happy ethnic groups, in fact congratulations to EPRDF to that extent. Yet, an unhappy individual whose rights are trampled upon on daily basis is excused for believing that federalism has not made his destiny any better. Am I expected to surrender my

other basic human rights simply because I am now guaranteed to use my God given right to use my own language? These need not be mutually exclusive. EPRDF can salvage its federalism by assiduously working towards respecting and protecting individual human rights. It cannot cherry-pick the rights it wants to promote and protect and expect to be spared the wrath of the little man.

15. Conclusion: Ethiopia without EPRDF

As pointed out at the beginning of this note, the strength of any good system of government is to be judged with its continued existence after its 'founding fathers' are long gone. I sincerely wish that EPRDF or any political group, for that matter, can succeed in leaving behind a legacy of strong, harmonious and prosperous Ethiopia. Yet, ambitions are just ambitions unless matched by sincerity and hard work. We live in a real world and we cannot undo what happened. But we can change the future if we can learn from our past and change the way we do things. Imagine for a second an Ethiopia without EPRDF-a deeply Marxist party in a liberal cloak which runs the affairs of the Federal government and the regional States with a tight control. What do you see coming? To be optimistic, and even before we get there, to EPRDF's credit, without EPRDF's hands-on approach on the implementation of Federalism, Ethiopia would have already fragmented in to several independent states following the proclamation of the FDRE Constitution. We can simply say that the problem itself is EPRDF's own making but that is now in the past. The fragmentation did not happen because of EPRDF's tight control over the regional states, but we cannot get complacent. It is true that there is a common bond between peoples and there is no deep rooted animosity that might push some to exit the Federation abruptly. But history is littered with several examples of masses being taken for a ride by few of its misguided children. All it takes is for a few dissenters to take up arms and for a stupid government to start harassing the population for harboring the rebels.

The unexpected might happen and the EPRDF might lose power one way or another. Nothing lasts forever. Under this scenario there is no guarantee that the Federation will continue as we have not done our homework of building unifying institutions, protecting individual rights and making federalism appealing to regions which are either resource rich or large in size. There is no incentive for them to stay in the federation willingly. On top of it all, the Constitution has made it extremely easy for any regional state to secede. I do not want to conjure up a doomsday scenario in your minds, if I have not done so already. The silver-lining to all of this, however, is that we all want Ethiopia to prevail in the face of adversities. Our fates are so intertwined that we cannot stand by and watch when one of us starts to get adrift.

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