

# The Politics of Ethnic Nationalism in the Ethiopian Statehood: Its Challenges and Prospects

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## Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of contending and ultra-ethnic based nationalism movement in Ethiopia which has recently created a rift in the country, a divergence that could have far-reaching implications to the insecurity of the Ethiopian statehood. Through the use of a qualitative desk research approach, the paper reveals that the primacy of ethnicity and ethnic nationalism in Ethiopia originally emanated from the ideological inputs of Marxism-Leninism ideology, an ideology that dominates the politics of Ethiopia for more than two decades. The paper further argues that ethnic nationalism in the Ethiopia context arguably a recent phenomenon and its provenance primarily associated with the exclusive ideological narratives of the state elites and in some case the state formation process of the country. The paper further argues the guise 'nation-building' narratives of the post-1990s have further intensified the saliency of ethnicity in the Ethiopian Political market place. Put differently, the re-structuring of the Ethiopian state along ethnic lines and the constitutional engineering of 'self-determination' including secession has further intensified ethno-nationalist movement in the country which has been become the major challenges for the continuation of the Ethiopian statehood. Perhaps, its continuance as a unified state seems lays on the will of these ultranationalist groups.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity, Nationalism, Nation-Building, Political Narratives

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## 1. Introduction

Nationalism is the most powerful principle of political legitimacy in the modern world. The recent political development in the former USSR, Eastern Europe, and some third world multi-ethnic states demonstrates the powerful impact of nationalism in the making and unmaking of nations (Gellner, 1983; O'Leary, 1997; Smith, 2009; Wimmer, 2013). The recent contemporary developments in Eastern Europe indicate that nationalist movements have retained the capacity to shake states, empires, multicultural nations (Wimmer, 2013).

According to Wimmer (2013, p. 2), "most of today's more prominent and protracted wars are also associated with the national principle – the idea that each people should be self-ruled, that ethnic like should be governed by like". In his widely acclaimed book, *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner (1983) also reveals that "[c]onflict is predicted to occur 'where "ethnic" (cultural or other diacritical marks) are visible and accentuate the differences in educational access and power', and 'above all, when they inhibit the free flow of personnel across the loose lines of social stratification'".

Particularly, the small intellectuals of the powerless forefront determination to bring and transform their marginalized culture into the centre make ethnic nationalism a powerful weapon of the powerless in the contemporary world (Gellner, 1983). Put differently, blockages in social mobility, when tied to ethnic or other identity markers, are at the heart of nationalist conflicts (Gellner, 1983; O'Leary, 1997, Smith, 2009). Hence, the potential number of nation-states may be higher given the existence of numerous unsatisfied nationalisms which may succeed and in this context; the risk of the national question is more visible in a multi-ethnic state like Ethiopia (Markakis, 2011; Merera, 2002).

## 2. Significance and Justification of the Study

Because of successive regimes failure to democratize the state, the Ethiopian state and society have been undergoing a multidimensional crisis. The generational dream of attaining durable peace, unity with diversity and democracy is badly affected by exclusionary political narratives and ethnic-based nationalist movements. Moreover, ethnic nationalism movement in Ethiopia so enduring for the last half-century which opens a Pandora's box on the future of the Ethiopian statehood (Keller, 2014; Merera, 2002). Therefore, the relevance of this paper lies in making contribution conceptually to understand the complexity of the contemporary ethnic-based nationalist movements in Ethiopia which has been the core of the country's crisis for the last few decades.

What is worse is that the fall of the military regime of the Dreg<sup>1</sup> in May 1991 and the coming to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front<sup>2</sup> (hereafter EPRDF), dominated by the Tigray People's

<sup>1</sup> 'Derg' literally refers to a group of military committees (Bahru, 1991)

<sup>2</sup> The party is a coalition of four ethnic based political forces. These are the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo

Liberation Front (hereafter TPLF) further complicates certain conception of Ethiopian statehood (Keller, 2014; Lefort, 2006 ; Markakis, 2011; Merera, 2002). Committed in the national oppression thesis<sup>1</sup> inherited from the Marxist -Leninism ideology (Bahru, 1991, Merera, 2002), the EPRDF leadership has been defending a conception of Ethiopian society structured ‘from below’<sup>2</sup>, a new and radical political narrative which gives priority to ethnic loyalty than ‘Ethiopianness’ (Keller, 2014; Merera, 2002; Vaughan, 2011). As Aalen and Tronvoll (2009) write, the officially sanctioned nationalism designed and expressed by the EPRDF government was not powerful enough to neutralize other competing nationalist discourses, creating a complex and sometimes contradictory context of nationalist expressions.

Taking in to account these complex historical and political developments in the country, this paper has examined the nature and historical setting of this complex ultranationalist movement and its implication to the nation-building process of the country.

### 3. Material and Methods

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative desk research approach to develop the theoretical framework and to present and analyze the major findings of the study. Accordingly, the study uses the existing theories and debates on ethnicity, nation, and nationalism and other empirical research studies so as to examine the complex historical nature and dynamics of ethnic nationalism in Ethiopia. The literature survey for the theoretical chapter and the discussion is mainly based on secondary sources, blogs, public opinions, press realises, previous studies and academic journals and historical books. It is commonly known that qualitative research design is a panacea to explore and understand the multiple realities of societal problems in a complex setting (Creswell, 2008). In addition to this, analysing the problem of ethnicity, nation, and nationalism by itself requires a holistic understanding of the complex historical process and associated discourse in various contexts.

## 4. Theoretical Perspectives and Literature Review

### 4.1. The idea of Nation and nationalism

Nationalism is one of the most slippery and contentious concepts in the social sciences. The concept is heavily laden with ideological, religious, ethnic, racial and socio-economic and emotional traces (Smith, 2009; Wimmer, 2013). The conflicting attributes of nationalism in its modern historical expression exist in the fact that it has provided countless competing purposes. It has been considered as the principal ideology which empowered nations to seek self-determination and political statehood (Wimmer, 2013). It is also an important political force for disgruntled marginal or national groups within the nation-states to challenge state authority by questioning its claim to political power or demanding self-determination (Smith, 2009; Wimmer, 2013; Young, 2012).

In the Ethiopia context, nationalism is commonly perceived as a moral cloak for nation-builders as well as an ideological tool for ethnic groups. This twin purpose of nationalism has dominated the politics of Ethiopia for the last half-century. Put differently, nationalism is a preferred ideology for ethnic nationalist either to establish a state of their own or to assume political power within the state. Similarly, nation-builders associate the state with the core culture to realize their dream of building a unified nation based Gellner idea of ‘one-state one-nation’ principle.

On the other hand, a nation is most commonly defined from two perspectives: objectivism and subjectivism. The Objectivists postulate a nation as a group of human collectiveness based on shared objective characteristics or attributes of languages, ethnicity, common history, territory, cultural traits and the likes (Young, 2012). For (Young, 2012) the nation is the existence of common historical memories embedded within the population enclosed within the state boundaries. Similarly, Joseph Stalin quoted in Hobsbawm (1990, p. Viii) described a nation as “a historically evolved, stable community of language territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture”. This perspective is also broadened to define a nation based on a shared culture (Gellner, 1983).

Alternatively, some scholars define a nation from a subjective perspective which gives much emphasis to individual choice and their voluntarism to the nation. Accordingly, a nation is “a daily plebiscite” (Renner cited in Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 7) which determine by an individual if they chose to claim it. Besides this, emotional attachments, feelings, and elements of patriotism determine the idea of the nation<sup>3</sup> (Gellner, 1983). One of the major strength of this definition of the nation is it provides space for different languages, cultures, religion and the likes to coexist together in given territories as they did in France and Habsburg empire (Hobsbawm, 1990).

To further clarify the elusive concept of a nation, Gellner (1983) also proposed another definition which postulates the nation as a serious of the modernization process. For Gellner (1983, p. 54), “the establishment of

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people Democratic Organization (OPDO), Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) and Southern People Democratic Movement (SPDM) (Girma, 2018). Taken from End of module paper.

<sup>1</sup> It is a political narrative which indicates the existence of inequalities and political marginalization in the historic Ethiopia by ruling classes.

<sup>2</sup> A major departure from ‘Ethiopia first’ to ‘ethnic identity’.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Renan cited in Gellner (1983, p. 53) defined a nation as “a group which will themselves to persist communities”

pervasive high culture (standardized, literacy-and education-based system of communication) [...] has made it seem, to anyone too deeply immersed in our contemporary assumptions, that nationality may be definable in terms of shared cultures". According to him, it is the modern transition from spontaneous, non-literate "low" cultures to highly cultivated, literate and specialized "high" cultures which engender nationalism and nations (Gellner, 1983, 56).

A further definition of a nation is given by Anderson (1983, p.15) who describes the nation as imagined communities. For him, "[i]t is [imagined] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991, p. 15). Key to Anderson's understanding of nationalism is the notion of "imagined community", the fact of nationalism being not something material or natural (as often thought) but rather something that exists in the connection between culture and psychology (Anderson, 1983).

In the Ethiopia context, the influence of Marxism- Leninism movement since the second half of the twentieth century paved the way for the origin and proliferation nationalist movement in the Ethiopia context. The quest for modernization and reforms among intellectuals and political elites leads to formulating the "national question"-the vernacular language of Marxism ideology (Merera, 2002). To indicate the influence of Marxism on 'national question', Eric Hobsbawm quoted in Anderson (1983) states that Marxism movement and states have tended to become national not only in form but in substance, i.e., nationalist (Anderson,1983; Hobsbawm, 1990).

Put differently, the consciousness of an ethnic group can transform from ethnicity to nationalism when the group is led to a demand for the creation of a state of its own (Smith, 1998). In this context, it is convenient to use the term ethnic nationalism- nationalism based on the ethnic group with a perception of shared culture and history. The next section discusses the different perspectives to understand ethnicity.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Ethiopia context

The relevance of ethnicity and nationalism in the Ethiopia contexts has associated with the historical condition of state formation, the subsequent political struggle for power, resources, domination and marginalisation, and succession-mostly by elites but not limited to them, the legacies of Marxism-Leninism, the modernization process of the country, the radicalization of western-educated Ethiopians and to some extent the influence of colonialism.

Attached with the 'national question', Marxism ideology<sup>1</sup> had greatly influenced the political dynamics of Ethiopia in the second half of the twentieth century (Keller, 2014). As the Marxist literature on the 'national question' is "situated at the point of intersection of politics, technology, and social transformation" (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 10), it was also so influential in Ethiopia and within the ruling circle, suggestive of the value of using ethnicity to get within the 'mindset' of a population, the better to mobilize it to ends defined by the class struggle (Messay, 2003).

The conceptualization of ethnic issues as the major problem of Ethiopia also influenced by colonial heritages. For example, the view of Ethiopia as an Amhara<sup>2</sup> colony, before being constructed by Eritreans and some Oromo intellectuals, was an idea that Italians had originated to undermine the Ethiopian resistance (Messay, 2003). Furthermore, Italians promoted the notion of "Greater Tigre"<sup>3</sup> as well as that of "Greater Somalia," and during the five years of occupation divided Ethiopia along ethnic lines to activate "the revolt of the non-Amhara populations such as the Oromo and the Muslims" (Bahru, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1990; Messay, 2003). Later, the ethnicization of the Eritrean questions during the struggle periods popularizes ethnic nationalism.

Another historical development which apparently confirms the relevance of the concept is the existence of some of historical parallelism between Ethiopia and the former USSR where both empires were challenged by a nationalist question which later leads to the creation of many independent states in ex- USSR and the dismemberment of Eritria from Ethiopia of in 1993 (Keller, 2014). Besides to this, the constitutional engendering of self-determination in Ethiopia as an alternative to 'authoritarian high modernism' (Scott, 1998) further increase the relevance of the idea of nation, nationalism, and ethnicity to contemporary Ethiopia.

Hence, ethnic nationalism in the Ethiopia context – which understood as nationalism based on the ethnic group with a perception of shared culture and history dominates the politics of Ethiopia in the last few years. As such, this paper has informed by a holistic approach to ethnicity, but highly skewed to the instrumentalization and social constructive role of ethnicity. To capture the basic political issues ranging from the nation-building project to ethnic nationalism and the struggle for power; ethnicity and nationalism in Ethiopia are seen as an

<sup>1</sup> Stalin definition of the nation as "common history, common economy, common language, common culture" still appears to shape the political orientation of many political actors in Ethiopia both in theory and practice

<sup>2</sup> The dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia and proudly considered themselves as Ethiopians

<sup>3</sup> Another minority ethnic group in Ethiopia but dominates the political power since 1990s

ideology and instrument of political mobilization.

Whatever the different perspectives, the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in May 1991 opens the door to the constitutional engineering of self-determination rights to each ethnic group (Young, 1993). Besides this, the conquest of the centre by insurgent armies of the periphery destroys the existing cultural basis of the Ethiopian state. The country officially becomes a multi-ethnic state following the rise of ethnic consciousness in the country (Young, 1993). Put differently, Ethiopia, which claims a three-thousands - years lineage, witnessed like the Soviet Union sudden change since 1991 (Young, 1993). Whether it is called the “museum of culture” by Ethiopian nationalist or a prison “house of the nation” by critical observers like Gellner, the contemporary Ethiopia state subjected to relentless interrogation.

## 5.2. ‘Ethnocratic’ State and the dilemma of the Ethiopian statehood

The fall of the military regime of the Derg (Military committee) in May 1991 and the coming to power of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), led by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), not only meant the military victory of the latter, but also the imposition of a certain conception of Ethiopian statehood (Young, 2012). The nation-building strategy stressed the “primordial” belonging to “Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples” as the basis of Ethiopians’ identity (Keller, 2014; Markakis, 2011; Merera, 2002). Hence, it is possible to argue that the reconfiguration of the Ethiopian state along the ethnic line marked the end of civic-nationalism ideology in the country.

What is worse is not only the new leadership violently condemned the preceding imperial and Derg conceptions of Ethiopian nationhood; it also systematically associated a certain ethnic group to previous leaders which engenders various grievances and discontents which later marked the opening of popular protest in 2015. As the extract of the EPRDF program (1993, p. 13) clearly shows those ethnic groups which still adhere to the principle of “Itiopiawinnet” (united Ethiopianness) labelled as chauvinist. These exclusive political narratives further intensified the dynamics of ethnic nationalism in the country. Besides this, it has also been argued that the EPRDF has succeeded in putting ethnic groups against each other by its policy of ethnicizing the country’s politics (Messay, 1999). No less importantly, the new dynamics of ethnic nationalism in the country is more pervasive and far wider than before as millions of ordinary citizens mobilized for collective actions across class, religious and regional divides (Young, 2012).

Related to this, Young (2012) states what fuel ethnic rivalry is the drive to take full advantage of group benefit (Young, 2012). In the Ethiopia context where the political marketplace is only accessible for those powerful groups organized ethnic groups (Keller, 2014; Merera, 2002), it appears obvious that mobilization of ethnic solidarity is a necessary strategy to realize the political aspiration and to enhance group solidarity (Keller, 2014). In similar vein, Lidetu Ayalew<sup>1</sup>, in his interview with Reuters (24 August 2018) also discloses that “[t]he ethnicised nature of our politics has emphasized our differences for the last 27 years, [...]we have to find a way out of this if this country is to remain intact” which vividly indicates the pervasive impact of ethnic nationalism in the unity of contemporary Ethiopia state.

## 5.3. The Intensification of Ethnic-Nationalism in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian constitution that came into force in August 1995 divided the country into nine ethnic-based regional states namely Afar, Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, Oromia, Ethiopian Somali, Tigray and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (The FDRE const, 1995, Art. 52). According to the country’s central statistical agency census, the largest ethnic groups in the country are Oromo 35%, Amhara 28%, Somali 6%, Tigray 5%, Sidama 4%, Gurage 2.5% and Afar 1.7% (CSA, 2007).

For many observers, the EPRDF<sup>2</sup> has been insidiously creating and politically manipulating ethnic tensions and conflicts among the dominant groups in order to fracture potential political alliances that might threaten its political supremacy (Keller, 2014; Markakis, 2011; Merera, 2002). Unlike its predecessors, the EPRDF led government accused of deliberately targeting the Amhara ethnic group and to some extent the Oromo and Somali Ethnic groups. One of the fundamental political departure in the post-1990s period in Ethiopia is the reformulation of the idea of “Nation, Nationalities and People” in the preamble of the constitution (FDRE const, 1995). Accordingly, ethnic groups are transformed themselves into a nation (Merera, 2002) which later intensified ethno-nationalist movement in the country.

The ‘sacred’ law of ethnic loyalty strongly diminishes the pre-existing shared culture among ethnic groups. Hence, it is reasonable to argue that under the framework of ethnic federalism, each elite of ethnic groups is relentlessly homogenizing their won respect ethnic groups which are equivalent to Gellner’s principle of co-nationals (Gellner, 1983). Furthermore, the narratives of labelling Ethiopia as “a prison house of nations” apparently becomes visible when the EPRDF led government puts fifty-six ethnic groups into one nation even

<sup>1</sup> Well known Ethiopian opposition politicians

<sup>2</sup> It has been stated that the Tigray People Liberation Front dominated the country for the last 27 years.

though each ethnic group is their own distinct cultural identities including language (Markakis, 2011).

Hence, the political and economic marginalization coupled with the dividing ideology of the EPRDF that has been implemented in the country for the last many years has been considered as the primary reasons for the radicalization of ethnic nationalism in the country. The situation became extremely tense for the last few years. What is worse is some ethnic groups already manifested as a de facto -nation-state. Put differently, almost all major ethnic groups are aspiring to either to declare their autonomy under the federal government or secessions. There is a widespread opinion that the growing ethnic nationalism is going to plunge the country into a serious crisis.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

### Conclusion

The paper formulates the following three sets of conclusions. The first set of the conclusion associated with the historical account of the making of the Ethiopian state associated with Tilly's framework of 'War made the state the state made War' notion of the state formation process. The territorial boundary of the Ethiopian state was constructed through the interrelated processes of war-making, state-making, and protection. This had both political and cultural ramifications which later create a fertile condition for the genesis of ethno-nationalist movement.

Second, nation and nationalism requires strong national consciousness which emerges primarily as a result of several factors including the spread of modern education, better communication, improved transportation system, growth of mass media and the press, higher standard of literacy and growth of literature, and intensive interaction among people, all of which combine to provide "a crucial environment for the spread of a national consciousness through a given population. In the Ethiopia context, the genesis of the nationalism movement primarily linked with the historical state formation process and the expansion of modern education in the second half of the twentieth century. These two-historical developments coupled with the exclusionary political narratives of ethnicity highly influenced the intellectuals to construct radicalized ethnic-based identities.

The final set of conclusions concerned the coming of the EPRDF and its political ideologies. The 'national question' that remained even after the fall of the Derg regime received an answer through the ethnic federalism system. However, the irony law of ethnicity has further radicalized ethno-nationalist movements in the country. However, the idea of the nation and nationalism in the context of multi-ethnic states still provokes debates. Particularly, the feasibility of Gellner assumption of the nation as a congruence between state and nation in a multi-ethnic state hardly possible. Hence, it deserves further engagement based on the existing realities.

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