

# THE EPRDF AND CRISIS OF THE ETHIOPIAN STATE

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## INTRODUCTION

Present day Ethiopia constitutes a multi-ethnic society where ethnic politics and ethnic mobilization had been the path to power and the pillars to maintain it, perceptibly since the Era of Princes (1769-1855). During that period, Ethiopia was parcelled or ‘decentralized’ in disorderly fashion among local princes, who drew support from their ethnic or sub-ethnic base. To this day, ethnic grounds have been the power base of Ethiopian political elites under various banners and forms.

Ethiopia is now facing yet another experimental policy under the autocratic regime of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) whose core element is the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which set up an ethnic based federal government structure with a constitutional “right” for nationalities to secede. After a decade of trial, this experiment too does not at all appear to work and has instead sown the seeds of recurring conflicts that deeply wreck the state.

Despite the unwarranted foreign policy guidelines pursued by the successive regimes, Ethiopian rulers never find it difficult to sustain the backing of one or the other foreign power – powers unscrupulously bent on their national or global interests. This relationship has left the Ethiopian state in perpetual crisis. Such relationship has even lead states like that of Somalia to disintegrate.

### **I. Major Factors Locking the Ethiopian State in Crisis**

True, the Ethiopian state is one of the oldest states in the world (see Conti-Rossini, Carlo and Tamrat, Tadesse), yet Ethiopia is a troubled state that finds itself at the bottom of the global community of nations by all economic, social and political measures. The roots of its problems lie primarily in its self appointed leaders who take charge of governance at their will, never to deliver even a fraction of what they promise as they ascend to power. Although foreign actors have their lot shaping and sustaining the predicaments Ethiopia has to live with, the lion share of the responsibility goes to the leadership that controls the internal process of governance, which also facilitates the intrusion of the external factors.

To understand the enormous problems compounding Ethiopia, one may go back in history to have an insight of the evolution the Ethiopian State had to undergo and link it up with its present socio-economic standing – an integral inference that should not be over looked if a comprehensive understanding of the present impasse is the concern. It is then exceedingly important to look in to the prevailing determinant factors that are liable to its existing plight as the first step of resolving the difficult impasse Ethiopia is encountering.

The major factors that have put the Ethiopian State in deep rooted crisis bad governance being the main reflection, could be classified into two: (1) the internal factors, (2) the external factors.

(1) The Internal Factors comprise:

(a) The leadership, which in most cases is authoritarian, lacks accountability and transparency and entrenched in corruption.

(b) An elite, which is fragmented on – ethnic divides – religious affiliations – vested interests.

(c) Disempowered society, which finds it difficult to defend its interest collectively or influence governance. A combination of State repression, disorienting elite and an authoritarian cultural legacy contribute to dispossess the society of acquiring empowerment.

(2) The External Factors, the major players being:

(a) Powerful states who put their national interest over and above the individual or collective interests of weak nations or regions, giving no regard to empowerment.

(b) Donors and NGOs who seek local elite alliance that have already been impediment to the growth of civil society which strive to empower itself.

One should also denote that the culture of resolving pertinent matters related to power and politics with the gun had enabled unpopular forces and authoritarian governments to prevail over consent and the rule of law. The need of addressing such a violent culture over the prevalence of dialogue and reason as a concomitant factor should be well taken.

To demonstrate the interplay of the internal and external factor on governance outlined above and the ill functioning of the state, Ethiopia, which is also at the centre of the Horn of Africa politics, is a best case in point. Most African states, by and large, may not be too far from this scenario as well.

## **II. Deepening of the State Crisis**

Given the post-Cold War geopolitical scenario and the fall of the military dictatorship under Colonel Mengistu, it was essential for the victorious TPLF-led EPRDF forces to secure the backing of the USA and its European allies and Israel (which were contented with the fall of the former pro-Soviet military regime) in order to consolidate their position. The US spared no time supporting the militarily stronger TPLF. It is ironic, though, to note that the so-called Stalinist TPLF, seen at the height of the cold war as terrorist by the ‘free democratic western alliance’, being supported by the US and Europeans as it ascends to power.

The TPLF and its affiliate organisations went on unilaterally creating a transitional government in 1991 - installing a new constitution and implementing a highly

controversial policy of ethnic politics which grants the right of secession to the over eighty ethnic groups in the country (1995 constitution, art.39, no.1). The restructuring of the Ethiopian state proceeded in accordance with the dictates of the EPRDF-led transitional government, with the leadership of the TPLF at the helm of the new political set up. Although some US and European admirers would like to call this “a democratisation process by a new breed of leaders” with out seriously looking into the nature of this force and the circumstances in which it seize power, critical observers however had warned of the dangers this path entails. Terence Lyons correctly pointed out that: the EPRDF led throughout this transition period and capitalized on its commanding position to consolidate its power. The party dominated the political landscape by virtue of its military power (Lyons 1996:121). “The electorate’s choice was basically between the EPRDF and their allies or no vote”, declared the Norwegian Observer Group (1992:12). Finally in August 1995, a new government was declared ‘elected’ with the same political grouping. The post-Mengistu political processes, including the formation of the sovereign Eritrean state in 1991 (see Hagos: 1995), as one could anticipate, have led to serious confrontations between the new regime in Addis Ababa and a multitude of oppositional groups of various political and ideological persuasions.

Whenever such conflicting political, social, cultural and economic interests lack space for compromise or broad-based consensus, and when local governance proceeds without deliberation or consultation at the popular level, long-term peace drifts beyond reach. If the absence of war does not necessarily mean peace, then today’s Ethiopia (where the seeds to yet another cycle of conflict are being sown), certainly illustrates this argument.

With the TPLF in power, ethnic based national entities in Ethiopia have entered a new era, where different political arrangements were anticipated. The TPLF (here after better referred to by its official name, EPRDF), without the consensus of the Ethiopian people or that of the numerous political organisations, hastily imposed a highly ethnicised political experiment. According to this experiment, every ethnic group is allowed to secede and form its independent state; thus Ethiopia could find itself divided into not less than eighty ethnic-based states. This policy, ostensibly meant to draw support and legitimacy from the numerous ethnic groups for the TPLF, has only served to expedite the emergence of another wave of ethnic conflicts, besides leaving the entire multiethnic, multilingual, multi-religious population in a state of confusion.

As to the realisation of the collective aspiration of the Tigrayans, who had paid dearly during the struggle, no meaningful change has occurred, except that they served as a stepping stone for the TPLF leaders to seize power over the whole of Ethiopia, a power without a social base. To make matters worse, the Tigrayan population, on the one hand, is seen by other Ethiopians as an accomplice of the TPLF, while on the other hand is forced to support the TPLF leaders in Addis Ababa, in their confrontation with the Ethiopian opposition. The reason why no opposition party, other than the TPLF, is allowed to work in Tigray is simply to claim undivided support for the ruling party, hence trampling over the democratic rights of the Tigrayan people to organize an opposition.

True, it was the combined effort of the Ethiopian peoples and various liberation movements, albeit the significant military role played by the TPLF, which has brought the seventeen years of the 'Derg's' military dictatorship and reign of terror to an end. Most Ethiopians welcomed the change, genuinely hoping that who-ever came to power this time, may not be as horrendous as the military junta. In the beginning, no one seemed to contest that this was a positive achievement, although some people were casting their reservation because of the TPLF's wavering stand on Ethiopian unity<sup>1</sup> and its ideology, which from the beginning was ultra-left but now appearing to embrace the Western liberal democracy and 'free' market. Many foreign governments - the US taking the lead - also offered instant recognition to the new rulers assuming that they will easily join their club unlike the 'pro-Soviet' military dictators.

The concern of the US-led Western powers was obvious. They wanted to arrest the expansion of "Islamic Fundamentalism" which was seen to be posing a serious challenge to their cultural values and a threat to their material interest in and around the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. Sudan, where Islamist government is gaining ground, and occupying a strategic position in The Horn has to be checked from influencing the region. The US found the TPLF, a better-organised and manageable military force in Ethiopia that could accomplish the strategic tasks it wanted to pursue. Despite its leftist rhetoric, Meles Zenawi's TPLF swiftly came to terms with the US, and has come to be an ally in harnessing the anticipated opposition from the other Ethiopian political forces and the people at large. The US was more than willing, therefore, to facilitate the seizure and consolidation of power in Ethiopia by the TPLF.

As the forces of the TPLF and EPLF were closing in on Addis Ababa and Asmara respectively, in London, on 27 May 1991, Herman Cohen, US assistant secretary of state for Africa, met with leaders of the militarily stronger TPLF, OLF and EPLF and the delegates of the collapsing 'Derg', ostensibly to negotiate a peaceful transition of power. Other political forces that could have affected Ethiopia's future were ignored. A golden opportunity for a political settlement was brushed aside in favour of military solution. Before a negotiated settlement was reached, at the end of May 1991, Meles Zenawi, after spending a night in the American Embassy in Khartoum, suddenly showed up in Addis Ababa to head the forthcoming Ethiopian government.

The US and its allies spent no time granting the new regime diplomatic recognition as well as financial aid. US military and technical experts, including constitutional advisors began flowing to Zenawi's administration within months of taking office. A year later, in an interview with the Ethiopian Commentator (EC), Mr. Marc Baas, US Ambassador to Ethiopia said, "The overall policy of the US towards Ethiopia is to promote the process of democratisation in this country and the opening up of the free market economy. We have done a great deal in the last year [1992]. I have signed agreements for over 105 million dollars in emergency food and humanitarian assistance, in addition to over 170 million dollars of development assistance" (EC: May 1, 1993, p.31-32). The commitment of the US to hook Ethiopia into its

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<sup>1</sup> See *Manifesto of the TPLF, Vol. I, pg. 24, published Feb. 1976, which declared that the first task of the TPLF would be " the establishment of an independent democratic republic of Tigray". This was the stand of the present EPRDF leaders and was a point of difference with the author who consistently fought for a democratic unity of Ethiopia.*

globalisation orbit lies in the fact that geo-politically, Ethiopia is an important country in Africa - coping with peace keeping, hosting mediatory talks between contesting African political actors, tackling the Islamist state of Sudan and similar radicals in Somalia with the co-operation of Uganda, Eritrea and Egypt for which the EPRDF regime is remunerated \$100 million worth military aid a year from the US.

Zenawi's regime, with its extremely narrow and uncertain social base, was confronted internally, with the opposition of the Ethiopian people that denied it the mandate to rule the country, and externally, with the pressure the US exerts to fight its proxy war with Islamist Sudan. Zenawi's choice appears to be repressing the opposition of the people and conceding to US policy. In a poor country like present day Ethiopia, that is confronted by a range of internal and external problems, a stable government is less likely, if not impossible, to emerge under such administration ridden with conflicting policies. People, who argue that the current government is better than the former military regime of Mengistu, should better know that the fall of one form of dictatorship does not necessarily mean a transition to a democratic and peaceful system. The difference was only that Mengistu was pro-Soviet and Zenawi became pro-West, yet both doing the same thing to their people.

In fact, in today's Ethiopia, an unprecedented wave of resistance is in the making. The EPRP in the west, the OLF in the south, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the south-east, the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Front (ARDF) in the east have stepped up their fight against the EPRDF. Many other political organisations, including the Oromo National Congress (ONC), the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Union (SEPDU), the All Amhara People's Organisation and the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) from within and the Tigrayan Alliance for National Democracy (TAND), the Ethiopian Group for Social Democracy (EGSD), the Ethiopian Medhine Democratic Party (MEDHIN) and many others from outside the country are pressing hard to bring about a fundamental change in Ethiopia. Time and again, all these organisations have been publicly calling for peace and reconciliation. The EPRDF, however, has remained deaf to all popular calls for peaceful change and has continued to push the country to a state of chaos and civil war.

The unyielding response of Zenawi's regime to all the popular and legitimate calls of the Ethiopian people and political organisations could also be scrutinised from another dimension. In 1985 a party, officially known as the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) was established within the TPLF, Meles Zenawi as its chief ideologue. In its constitution, this party declared that:

MLLT, as the core of the future Ethiopian Marxist Leninist Party, is the only correct party free from all sorts of revisionism (Trotskyism, Maoism...) that could constitute a proletarian-peasant dictatorship to liberate the Ethiopian people (Constitution of MLLT 1985:1).

Any other political organisation that does not ideologically correspond to that of MLLT's was labelled 'reactionary' and 'anti-people', and hence should be cleansed. In an interview with The Independent, at the end of 1989, the present Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, asserted that "the Soviet Union and other Eastern-bloc countries have never been truly socialist. The nearest any country comes to being

socialist as far as we are concerned is Albania” (The Independent, 28 Nov. 1989). To him, as was clearly maintained in the same interview, only this party could lead to a “fully democratic state” (Ibid). The officially published programme and declarations of the MLLT and TPLF are no longer visible since Zenawi joined the camp of the US; he prefers not even to mention that he was a leftist. Eclectic as it appears, Zenawi’s policies have drawn the whole country into a state of chaos and confusion, because of the incompatibility between what he thinks and what he does. I will look now into some of the practical measures and policies employed by the TPLF-led EPRDF, in Ethiopia’s complex power politics.

### **III. Democracy at Bay**

Mengistu’s authoritarian regime and its reign of terror forced thousands of young Ethiopians to take up arms and fight back organised under national and multi-national fronts. All fought basically for a democratic and egalitarian system. Doing best on the military front however, in May 1991 the TPLF managed to seize state power forming the EPRDF, a so-called umbrella organisation.

After years of struggle, the time for Zenawi’s “fully democratic State” and its ‘revolutionary’ slogans of democratic rights, national equality, freedom of expression and organisation, rule of law and human rights came to be tested - rights for which the people have struggled for decades and await in earnest for their realisation.

Regrettably, EPRDF leaders took no time to prove that in practice they are no different from their predecessors, the military dictators. As they grabbed power, they began systematically spreading their offensive campaign against legitimate democratic organisations who like them had fought the Mengistu regime. To silence any opposition elements within the country and deny freedom of expression that could perhaps lead to mobilise people against their unpopular policies, EPRDF leaders have launched a reign of terror starting by opening fire on peaceful demonstrators of Addis Ababa University students only a few days after they seized state power.

Encouraged by opposition parties within and outside the country, many papers critical of the government began to emerge. Yet, whenever critical remarks against the government appear on the papers, the respective editors, journalists and publishers were immediately dragged to prison accused of negative campaigning against the government. For instance, according to Amnesty International:

“Since October 1992, over 100 journalists and publishers of private newspapers and magazines in Addis Ababa have been arrested and a score or more others have been summoned for interrogation. Two journalists have “disappeared” (Amnesty International 1995:10).

Thousands of members of political organisations, unions and associations who posed serious challenges and espouse different programmes from that of the EPRDF are at present languishing in prisons and detention centres. In the same report, Amnesty International reveals that over 20,000 officials and members of the OLF, AAPO, EPRP, ONLF and Southern Ethiopian Political Parties are detained without due

process of law and subjected to harsh imprisonment and torture (Ibid:13-27). After giving details of gross violations of human rights including names of people killed by EPRDF forces, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) states that:

The rigid, self-righteous and uncompromising position of those in power and their apparent determination to hold the monopoly of power by any means is matched by the thwarted peace efforts and frustrated ambitions of the opposition parties (EHRCO 7th Report, 26 Aug. 1994).

In the same vein, in its resolution of 17-05-2001, the European Parliament “calls for the holding of a general inter-Ethiopian dialogue, with all the opposition groups, including armed movements and the representatives of civil society, on the peace and national reconciliation provided for by the 1998 Paris Conference, in order to achieve a peaceful resolution of the country’s political, economic and social problems” (Resolution on Human Rights in Ethiopia, B5-0360, 0363, 0370, 0376, 0386 and B5-0396/2001).

From day one in power, the EPRDF apparently has been unpopular basically because it came to power by military force and remained in power using the same instruments of force that brought it to power. This partially explains why the EPRDF is engaged in gross violation of human and democratic rights. The democracy talked about by the EPRDF and its allies is nothing more than a fashionable paper formality that camouflages the true nature of the EPRDF leadership.

In brief, the nature of EPRDF’s eclectic ideology and the application of the policies that emanated there by had generated immeasurable uncertainty in the country’s bureaucratic apparatus deterring the functioning of the state. The so-called constitution, crafted by the EPRDF and its advisors was neither legitimate nor could regulate the role of the state as it was basically a programmatic constitution of the ruling party.

As events revealed, the new constitution, no matter what was inscribed in it appearing to defend the rights of citizens, nevertheless like Haile Sellassie’s and Mengistu’s constitutions was no more than a piece of paper granted by autocratic leaders that could only serve the interest of the ruling group.

#### **IV. Ethnic Polarisation**

The TPLF-led EPRDF come to power promising, among other things, the right to self-determination, including and up to secession for which it had fought rigorously for sixteen years. So it is not surprising when article 39, No. 1 of the EPRDF sponsored new constitution reads: Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession. This may lead to generate the feeling that an unlimited political right is granted to all the nationalities in Ethiopia. In practice however the EPRDF seems to show no concession to other forces with the same demand. To this effect, it had declared war on the Ogadeni National Liberation Front (ONLF), the intensity of the war and its

heavy cost being reported even in the government's papers (see Ethiopian Herald, Jan - Feb. 1997).

One is then bound to wonder what are the principles of the EPRDF regarding the right to self-determination and inquire how the EPRDF reconciles its theory and practice of self-determination, in particular article 39 of its new constitution. Of course the EPRDF does not provide a clear explanation to this riddle, nor to a number of pertinent political and economic questions that will be raised below.

It is fair to admit that there is no easy answer to such complex issue of self-determination. Genuine democratic endeavour could only pave the way to reach an acceptable solution. The contradictory position of the EPRDF regarding self-determination however, lacks both a genuine approach and democratic participation by the people.

As we have noted earlier, the TPLF, before and after establishing the EPRDF in 1991, obviously understood that as an ethnic-based national movement for sixteen years, its social base was restricted to Tigray, with a population of about four million in a vast country of fifty five million people. When it became apparent that Mengistu's regime was collapsing and a power vacuum was imminent, and as a better organised military force than the other opposition movements, the TPLF made a swift advance to the capital, in the name of the EPRDF, which was created late in the day to extend the image of a multi-national force. The strength and participation of the EPDM (composed of about two hundred members) and OPDO (just formed of few POWs from the military regime) - organisations that helped the TPLF form the EPRDF - was only nominal. Suddenly the TPLF found itself in a sea of people, it has never been fit to mobilise or organise during its struggle and whose allegiance has been to other political organisations most of which have been antagonistic to the TPLF/EPRDF. The highly motivated TPLF army which expected to get a warm hero's welcome for its sacrifice of getting rid of the military dictators had to suffer verbal, and at times physical, attack from the non-Tigrayan majority of Ethiopians.

Without having thought through of its application and having failed to anticipate the consequences of its actions, hastily, the TPLF declared the right to self-determination including secession and invited all ethnic groups in the country to organise on an ethnic basis and join the EPRDF. The EPRDF leaders naively hoped the newly formed ethnic organisations, which understandably lack the necessary organisational experience and strength to run their own affairs by themselves would rush to join the EPRDF in the citadel of power, thereby hoping to draw support and develop legitimacy to rule the country.

Contrary to the expectation of the EPRDF leaders, many ethnic organisations have begun to demand their version of self-determination, including secession without even considering their politico-economic viability as independent nation-states. The Ogadeni, the Oromo, the Afar and the EPRP are at present engaged in armed struggle against the TPLF-EPRDF regime. Many others are waging propaganda war from within and outside the country, some of which are contemplating armed confrontation, openly stating that 'those who come with a gun can only go with a gun.'

The EPRDF's ethnicised political device to generate legitimacy and consolidate hold of power proved to be not only a failure, but also 'a thorn in the flesh' for the regime. The no less than eighty ethnic groups in Ethiopia, which thought to exercise the unlimited political, economic and social rights that go as far as secession to form a nation state, as inscribed in the new constitution, have become unmanageable, largely because of the ill-conceived experiment of ethnic politics of the EPRDF. This is why we find these days a new wave of ethnic-based national challenges of many nationalities: Afars, Ogadenis, Oromos, Sidamas, Beni Shangulis, to mention but a few.

Ethnic-based nationalism, generally speaking, being a reaction to national domination or oppression, within it bears - what EPRDF is fostering - an exclusionist motive reflected in many ways by all nationalist actors and expressed as 'we' vis-à-vis 'them'. "At the heart of nationalism", argues John Keane, "is its simultaneous treatment of the Other as every thing and nothing. The Other is seen as a knife in the throat of the nation" (Keane 1995:193). And as Peter Alter further argues, "Nationalism, to all intents and purposes, means undisguised political egoism. As an ideology it preaches solidarity with and willingness to make sacrifice to one particular social group" (Alter 1994:118). Carried away by its military success, the TPLF conveniently opened a Pandora's box that could not be closed so easily, except, perhaps, by sheer force which obviously creates a countervailing force that could bring the demise of the former.

To fight domination or oppression and opt for an egalitarian state of relationships is a desirable thing, but to go for secession, brushing aside centuries old social, economic and political interdependence is problematic. Failing to learn from the humiliating defeat of the former dictators or even from the predicament of neighbouring Somalia, the EPRDF leaders are keen on promoting the ethnic factor by pushing it to its extreme limit. At least two instances of this short-sighted ethnic policy could be referred to:

- a) instructing and pressing the South Ethiopia People's Democratic Coalition (SEPDC) composed of thirteen ethnic organisations to be represented in the national assembly on a single ethnic basis rather than as a coalition,
- b) forcing the multi-national Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) which was initially TPLF's junior partner in forming the EPRDF, to represent only the Amhara ethnic group and change its name to Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). Such undertakings clearly reflect how far Zenawi's government is bent on promoting ethnicity, which leads to exclusionary politics which in turn had negative impact on the socio-economic integration of the country.

Another significant political force marginalized by EPRDF's ethnic politics is the whole spectrum of multi-national political organisations. This Ethiopian political segment puts emphasis on the unity of the people and the integrity of the country as one 'national' entity. Some of these organisations - like the EPRP and MEISON - have a long history of struggle no less than that of the TPLF. These multi-national forces have been at loggerheads with the TPLF ever since its inception and their relationship worsened when it seized power. Despite the hostility reflected on both sides, these organisations together with other ethnic forces, have taken the initiative to peacefully negotiate with the TPLF. The Paris Peace and Reconciliation Conference

of March 1993 and the Carter Peace Centre Conference of February 1994 could be referred to as some of the constructive endeavours on the part of the multi-national opposition parties. None of these peaceful challenges seem to convince the EPRDF leaders, while anger and frustration was mounting in the quarters of the opposition as well as with the peace mediators. In a letter written to the opposition organisations in 18 March 1994, former US President Jimmy Carter stated his frustration as follows: “the negotiation with the government could not proceed further because of President Meles’s unwillingness to proceed on the proposed terms of negotiation.”

When the doors to negotiated settlement of existing conflicts are closed and state repression becomes the response to peaceful initiatives, what could the next plausible step of these multi-ethnic and the numerous ethnic organisations be? How do we influence the current leaders to get into a democratic track and avoid violence as a means to achieve ends? Such are the questions revolving these days in the minds of many concerned Ethiopians. Naturally, a lot of proposals are being put forward to these ends. Some propose a “comprehensive national civil disobedience organised at the grass roots level” (Araya 1996:32), as the only hope for Ethiopia’s predicaments. There are many others who argue that power holders, as a rule, listen only to countervailing power, and therefore the only remaining option to set Ethiopia free from the shackles of ‘the dictators’ who remain deaf to the repeated calls for peace - is to use force. Whichever direction the struggle may take, Ethiopia seems to face yet another catastrophe, perhaps worse than the present chaotic situation.

## **V. Can’t We Break the Cycles of Conflict?**

No matter how complex this question appears to be and the solution not within easy reach, the need to confront it, however, is indisputable.

The present political crisis in Ethiopia basically emanates from the unbridled desire of the TPLF leaders to monopolise power in all its aspects as was evident with their predecessors. This impasse has two major effects: on the conflict of the EPRDF with the opposition forces on one hand and on the mounting tension among ethnic groups on the other.

The US and its allies’ one-sided intervention, which had ignored the will of the people and the role of the opposition forces, also aggravated this crisis. Intellectuals who for various reasons support the EPRDF are worsening the crisis by blindly defending the very wrong policies that are recreating conflicts. Perhaps Ethiopia’s leaders love to adulate and be swayed by uncritical remarks like that of Stephen Ellis who with carefully selected words declares that “Ethiopia is experimenting with an ethnically based constitution which to an outsider, looks hazardous. But perhaps it looks different to those who live in Ethiopia” (Ellis 1996:271). Ironically, while Ellis writes about “the atrocities committed in the name of Islam in Algeria and Egypt” (Ibid: 272), he does not refer to what accompanied the experiment - i.e. a catalogue of war atrocities perpetrated on the Oromos, Ogadenis and Afars in the South and East and a plethora of human rights violations, ‘disappearances’, large-scale imprisonment and torture - in short, organised state terror throughout the country, including Tigray, the

ethnic base area of the TPLF. Adhana Haile Adhana goes even further to tell us that, "In politics, the Ethiopian peoples have already stepped in the 'Garden of Eden' (Adhana, 1995:93); an opportunist position without content, which even Zenawi himself would not dare repeat.

The opposition forces are regrouping and reorganising themselves to wage a struggle for political space. Some of them have already formed an alliance, like the Coalition of the Ethiopian Opposition Political Organizations (CEOPO), and have undertaken a political offensive, with civil disobedience as one of their tactics. Others like the OLF, ARDU and ONLF are already engaged in armed struggle in the southern and eastern parts of the country.

Worst of all, the ethnic tension apparently is mounting sharply every day. The ethnic policy of the EPRDF which was meant to draw support from the no less than 80 ethnic groups in the country - a fatally simplistic approach - has only created an unmanageable crisis never experienced in the history of Ethiopia. To assert their 'independent' identity and justify their claim to statehood of their own (no matter regarding the viability of the imagined state), almost all the ethnic groups have come forward with their exclusive agendas. The present chaotic predicament reminds many Ethiopians of their mid 17th to mid 19th history, the 'Era of Princes', when, as Markakis puts it "provincial rules waged a protracted struggle for supremacy...central power was entirely eclipsed and the throne itself remained vacant" (Markakis 1990:15). These ethnic agendas pretend they have nothing socially, politically, economically or historically in common with the other ethnic compatriots in the country.

Failing to realise the extent to which ethnic claims could be stretched, EPRDF leaders are frantically trying to reverse the proliferation of ethnic movements by launching state terrorism instead of committing themselves to democratic dialogue. These leaders should have better grasped how far ethnic sentiments could be destructive, looking at realities in Rwanda, Somalia or the former Yugoslavia. As Eugeen Roosens critically observes, "the study of ethnic phenomena reveals how far ethnic ideology and historical reality can diverge from each other; how much people feel things that are not there and conveniently forget realities that have existed" (Roosens 1989:161). Present day Ethiopian political realities by and large, reflect this critical assertion. It is only through engagement in a democratic and rational dialogue that one can make people feel the positive side of their history and appreciate harmonious relationship and unity.

Contrary to the preposterous position of Adhana and his likes, the gross violation of human and democratic rights - essentially state terrorist acts - perpetrated by Zenawi's regime have been repeatedly reported by many concerned organisations including Amnesty International, the European Parliament, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Africa Watch, to mention but a few. In its 'A World-wide Survey' annual report for the year 1993, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) writes, "For the second year running, Ethiopia held more journalists in prison than any other country in Africa" and gave the list of journalists in prison as of March 1994, that ranked Ethiopia second in the world (CPJ 1994:6-7). Prisons are over-crowded and there is no fair trial. According to EHRCO (1996: 13), only five court benches are handling over 35,000 cases. Of the several

thousand detainees who have been accused of committing human rights violations and war crimes during the 'Derg' regime, a considerable number have not yet been formally charged even six years after the fall of the 'Derg'. No plausible reason is given for the delay, except that the present leaders do not want to set the precedence that will try them tomorrow.

In countries with very low economic development, like Ethiopia, contention over the scarce economic resource, mainly land but other advantages too, also consolidates ethnic alliances. "The longing for material goods does not by itself produce ethnic identity or ethnicity ...Ethnicity, however, is directly concerned with group formation, and thus with power relation" (Roosens 1989:158). The political élite, in this case the opposition forces, for its own purpose fills the gap of political leadership in the ethnic uprising. Then the battle over state power intensifies devastating the country's human and material resources including the state itself as observed in Somalia.

On the part of most of the opposition forces there seems a growing realisation of the ensuing danger of large-scale violent conflict if the current situation is allowed to continue. The biggest danger is the emergence of an organised force of ethnic based extremists, some of them taking the form of racism or religious fundamentalism and who negate basic principles of democracy. The other danger comes from the anti-ethnic extremists who could not comprehend unity with diversity. This cluster of self declared politicians who venture for ethnic cleansing are also equally racist and dangerous for the unity of the country.

In a democratic system, self-determination and national unity are two concomitant categories and not mutually exclusive notions, as the extremists want us to believe. Yet, under dictatorial system of the EPRDF, self-determination like all democratic rights will always suffer repression, hence inducing a series of confrontations leading to fragmentation and recurring conflicts that knocks down the structure on which the state has to rest.

Today, as we speak, the EPRDF government which has failed to establish a popular base and mandate because of its undemocratic evolution to power and bad administrative practices have lost the political clout and the moral ground to govern. The country is in turmoil. The EPRDF leadership is splintered into two irreconcilable clusters of leaders. The army and police are on the streets to quell the uprising, sadly killing and wounding students demonstrating for change.

Given the deep rooted and complex predicaments Ethiopia is entangled with, heavy responsibility rests on the democratic opposition forces to avert the looming catastrophe. It is this democratic force, if organised in a common democratic front that could prevent the extremist forces who found fertile ground to grow in the ominous ethnic policy of the EPRDF, from dictating their short sighted and destructive terms of struggle. It is only the democratic forces who can forge a political mechanism that could empower the people to exercise their political rights in creating a dynamic constitution that could permanently enable them to influence the conduct and modality of a government they set up. Again, it is the democratic forces that could envisage a positive policy of self-determination, a notion which has galvanised almost the entire country and help create unity with all the cultural, linguistic, religious and historical diversity respected. If individuals, groups or organizations

could truly uphold these principles, there is no reason why they could not forge a broader front or a stronger party, that could force the EPRDF out of office and lead the country in peace to progress.

## **VI. Looking for Strategic Remedies**

Bringing the case of Ethiopia into picture, I have tried to establish the link between the authoritarian leadership, the fragmented elite and the strangled civil society on one hand and the global powers and the NGOs who could not terrace pass the powers realm of interest on the other – a link apparently one side could not afford to avoid and with no concern to the emergence and empowerment of civil society.

Abraham Lincoln, in his 19 May 1856 speech said “ The ballot is stronger than the bullet” and later in 10 Nov. 1864 added “We cannot have free government with out election; and if the rebellion could force us to forego or postpone a national election, it might fairly claim to have already conquered and ruined us.” I think close observation of the present Ethiopian power politics can reveal what President Lincoln warned, that is the Ethiopian civil society is almost conquered and about to be ruined. That seems the pattern in most of African States, except for South Africa and some very few states that managed to run a fair election and peaceful transfer of power.

Contemporary US administrations and European powers however seem to brush aside what Abraham Lincoln set straight some 145 years ago. Had the US and British administrations who in 1991 facilitated the transfer of power from the military dictators to the EPRDF included opposition parties and members of the civil society in the process of the transition, both the EPRDF on one hand and the outlawed opposition and the strangled civil society on the other wouldn't have reach the present confrontational posture which might lead to total anarchy.

Primarily though, it is the responsibility of the EPRDF leader who were driven by greed of power to exclude the opposition groups and members of the civil society who could and must have their share in peace and nation building. With out an inclusive politics no governance can function in the true sense of its meaning. Even if it seems to function in the beginning, definitely as the case in Ethiopia has demonstrated it is temporary and more devastating.

The requisite for peace and durable governance is then empowerment of the civil society accompanied by institutional structure that has an effective influence over governing bodies and an inclusive politics based on popular constitution that accommodates any opposition which other wise could be the seed of conflict.

Secondly, a mechanism has to be devised to depart from the syndicated relationship of the African elite and the NGOs whose expertise and resources should be based on realities at the grassroots level and controlled by an organised civil society.

The culture of settling differences through violent means could not be left to Africans alone. The Western World too is engaged in selected violent confrontations with the unbridled production of instruments of violence, thereby posing a potential threat that

could be unleashed any time the possessor deems it necessary. When people have to live under such state of affair, they get used to and also accept it as means of resolving differences or conflicts. Societies, whichever side they belong to benefit nothing from war. In fact they have rather much more fundamental interests that bring them together. Peace, free movement, exchange of ideas and resources, healthy environment etc. are some of common ideals they share and nurture. A concerted effort expounding the culture of peace in general and resolving conflicting interests peacefully in particular, concomitantly addressing the injustice that induce people to react, is absolutely indispensable.

An old Ethiopian saying goes: “If we don’t change our direction, we might end up where we are heading.”

Although there seems to be a positive intention of the international community to empower civil society, the practical application of the intent has always been frustrating, especially when it comes to Africa and Ethiopia in particular. Whatever contribution the international community may set for Africa, it has to be:

- (A) Empowerment oriented;
- (B) Must directly reach the peoples concerned/affected; and
- (C) There has to be concerted pressure nationally, regionally and internationally on governments that resist this direct approach to better government in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa.

The numerous Ethiopian intellectuals, if organized under a broad national visionary program of empowering the Ethiopian society and lead them to be masters of their destiny, an accountable and a transparent government could be set up and foreign actors would be forced to accept a fair relationship. Such a relationship could be the ground for stable and sustainable popular government with accountability and transparency as obvious norms of a functioning state.

This is a challenging direction, but a direction where we should head to if the deep rooted problems of Africa in general and that of Ethiopia in particular are to terminate.

## **ACRONYMS**

AAPO	All Amhara People's Organisation
ALF	Afar Liberation Front
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
ARDU	Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union
CAFPD	Coalition of Alternative Forces for Peace and Development
COEDF	Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
EHRCO	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
MEDHINE	Ethiopian Medhine Democratic Front
MEISON	All Ethiopian Socialist Movement
MLLT	Marxist Leninist League of Tigray
MNCPE	Multi-National Congress Party of Ethiopia
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONC	Oromo National Congress
ONLF	Ogadeni National Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
SEPDU	Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Coalition
TAND	Tigris Alliance for National Democracy
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TLF	Tigray Liberation Front
TNO	Tigrayan National Organisation
TPDM	Tigray People's Democratic Movement
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
TTE	Tigray Tigrigni Ethiopia

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