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Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Disc

chapter five

Regime Change and Ethno-Regionalism in Ethiopia: the Case of the Oromo

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Since 1991, Ethiopia has been undergoing its second social revolution. This revolution began in late May of that year, and it has proceeded in fits and starts ever since. In the process of seizing power, the Tigrayan-led Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), moved in to immediately fill a power vacuum caused not only by the collapse of the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, but also the complete destruction of the Ethiopian Army of six hundred thousand troops.

The challenge that then faced the victors was to reconstruct society on new ideological and social foundations. This was the same challenge that had faced both the previous imperial regime and the just-deposed revolutionary regime. The "national question" has been an ever present problem for Ethiopian regimes since the creation of the modern state less than a hundred years ago.¹ One of the primary reasons for the fall of Haile Selassie was that he attempted to create the myth of a multiethnic but unified nation-state whose citizens viewed their "Ethiopian" national identity as the most important socio-political category. In other words, you could be an Amhara, Sidama, Somali, or Oromo, while at the same time pos-

sessing an abiding connection with all other citizens in society in that you were "Ethiopian" first.

The purpose of this chapter is to critically analyze the approach taken by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in its attempt to resolve the national question while at the same time claiming the construction for the first time in Ethiopia of a democratic political system. In order to understand this process we must situate the discussion of the national question in a historical context. The next two sections of this chapter attempt to do this. In the third section the implications of the TGE policies toward the national question and democratic construction for the Oromo people in particular are considered. The reason for concentrating on the Oromo is because they represent around half of Ethiopia's population, and many Oromos have a deep-seated sense of having been culturally dominated and exploited by Amharas. Consequently, Oromo nationalism presents the TGE with its most serious challenge to national political integration.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN PERSPECTIVE

Haile Selassie had no specific policy of national political integration except for his tendency to integrate selected members of certain non-Amhara ethnic groups into the ruling class. His government conscientiously avoided any reference to ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity and eschewed mentioning such matters in official documents.² In fact the imperial regime devoted most of its energies toward discouraging or destroying the culture, language, and religions of non-Amhara ethnic groups, particularly those in the south and east of the empire. The tendency toward the political dominance of Shawan Amharas caused considerable resentment not only in the south and east but also among Amharas and Tigrayans from other areas.

Even when one considers the integration of certain members of non-Amhara groups into the upper echelons of the ruling class and the imperial bureaucracy, what stands out is the small number of such groups represented.³ The Emperor himself encouraged the marriage of Amharas, particularly the nobility, into important Oromo families, but in practice this had a negligible integrative effect. Even though the Oromos are the largest single ethnonational group in the empire, few of that groups ever occupied very high positions in the imperial bureaucracy of the army.⁴ In the 1960s, there appeared to be a systematic effort to co-opt non-Amhara ethnic patrons into the imperial ruling class. This move coincided with the growth of Somali and Oromo nationalisms.

In spite of Haile Selassie's efforts to systematically co-opt disgruntled ethnic groups through their leaders, this policy was doomed to fail. The core of his strategy remained the gradual "Amharization" of these groups without integrating them as equals or allowing them to share power in any meaningful way. Amhara culture was implicitly presented as the defining trait of the "Ethiopian" nationality. In other words, Ethiopian identity was at a fundamental level based in the Amhara language and Ethiopian Orthodox religion. To a certain extent, Haile Selassie was successful in his efforts, but because the state was held together mainly by the ethnic hegemony of Shawan Amhara and other ethnic elites who had been assimilated into "Ethiopian" culture, the myth of a unified Ethiopian nation-state, held together by consensus, never became a reality among large segments of peoples who were incorporated into the empire only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, although Haile Selassie tried to convince the Somalis in the Ogaden and Haud that they were first and foremost members of the "Ethiopian family,"⁵ and although his regime attempted, as other regimes before his, to suppress the emergence of Oromo national consciousness, significant numbers of these groups continued to feel that they had been colonized by northerners, and they yearned for the right to self-determination.

After a failed coup of 1960, there was a brief political opening in Ethiopian society, and international donor agencies pressed Ethiopia to liberalize its economy and politics. It was in this climate that there emerged a nascent sense of national consciousness among the Oromo people.⁶ For the first time but temporarily, ethnic associations were allowed to hold meetings and to engage in self-help projects based on their ethnic affinities.

Also, this was a period when it became clear that the movement for national liberation in Eritrea was a formidable threat to the maintenance of the extant boundaries of the modern Ethiopian state. In the end, Haile Selassie succumbed to a multiplicity of problems, some of them economic and others social. His regime was toppled in September 1974, and replaced a few days later by a military committee, the *Derg*. The *Derg* ruled for the next 17 years. Although it began as an oligopolistic clique, the regime by 1977 had been transformed into a personalistic dictatorship, under the direction of Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Like the Haile Selassie regime before it, the Mengistu regime failed to effectively address the "national question." It attempted to downplay the issue by introducing a new social myth based upon the principles of "scientific socialism," which holds that ethnicity is not a legitimate organizing principle.⁷ Instead, people are grouped

into mass organizations based upon their economic or social roles and positions. At the same time, it seemed clear to the Mengistu regime that some solution had to be found to the nationalities problem. Its answer: the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities. The function of this organization was to draft a new constitution that would further enhance the legitimacy of the Mengistu regime and lay the groundwork for a final resolution of the nationalities question.

At first the new regime attempted to deal with ethnically-based opposition by smashing its opponents. It stepped up the war in Eritrea in 1975, and in the early 1980's it attempted a decisive military resolution of the Eritrean problem in the failed Red Star Campaign. It resoundingly repulsed the attempts of ethnic Somalis to separate the Ogaden from Ethiopia between 1977 and 1978, and temporarily suppressed the Tigrayan and Oromo opposition around the same time.

At the same time the Mengistu regime apparently came to feel that it could not rely exclusively on force to preserve Ethiopian unity, and that it was going to have to attempt to create an aura of legitimacy for its rulership. First, it created the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in 1984. The party was based on the principles of scientific socialism, and eschewed the organization of groups along ethnic lines. It interpreted politics in terms of class struggle, and recognized only groups based upon non-ethnic categories. These groups were called "mass organizations."

In early February 1987, a new constitution, a hybrid that resembled the Soviet and Romanian Marxist-Leninist constitutions, was submitted to the general populace for endorsement, and received a reported 82 percent approval from 96 percent of those eligible to vote. The constitution established the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE), with a strong president and an 835-member National (Assembly) *Shengo*. Once the *Shengo* was elected and held its first sessions, in September 1987, one of the main pieces of enabling legislation had to do with the administrative reorganization of the empire. In an effort to diffuse nationalist discontent, the *Shengo* created 24 administrative regions and five so-called autonomous regions—Eritrea, Assab, Dire Dawa, Tigray, and the Ogaden. By granting autonomous status to Assab and Dire Dawa, the regime separated the economic cores from the regions of Eritrea and Oromia respectively.

Despite this gesture of regional organization, the response of most nationalist movements fighting the Mengistu regime was swift and threefold: They rejected the PRDE initiative, increased their military activities, and began to organize military cooperation

among themselves. Clearly, then, rather than enhancing the legitimacy of the Mengistu regime, the creation of the WPE, the PDRE, and the regional structure exposed its vulnerability. In late 1988, as the empire was in the throes of yet another major drought and under pressure from various nationalist movements, the Soviet Union informed Mengistu that it would soon cease to provide military assistance.

The beginning of the end for the Mengistu regime was the abortive coup of May 1989. In the process, the army began to collapse from within. Whole military units defected, taking their arms and equipment with them to the opposition forces. Over the next three years, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its umbrella organization, the EPRDF, came to control all of the Tigray and large segments of Wallo, Gondar, and Shawa. In Eritrea, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) took over all but the major towns of Asmara, Massawa, and Assab. What was more, by 1990, the EPLF, TPLF, and the OLF in separate parts of the empire, had begun to coordinate their military strikes against Mengistu's forces. Finally, Mengistu went to the bargaining table, but not in good faith. The regime failed to acknowledge that it was on the brink of military defeat, and collapsed decisively on May 25 1991.⁸

The EPRDF moved quickly after its victory to establish a transitional government. A national conference for this purpose was convened in July 1991 as an attempt on the part of the EPRDF to rapidly secure widespread acceptance among the general population. It resulted in the signing of a Charter by the representatives of some 31 political movements, the creation of an 87-seat Council of Representatives, and the establishment of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). The largest number of seats, 32, was reserved for the EPRDF, and the OLF was second with 12 seats. Significantly, no political organization that predominantly represented the formerly politically ruling ethnic group, the Amharas, was a signatory to the Charter or represented in the Council. In other words, the pact was **exclusive** rather than inclusive. I will return to this point below.

The EPRDF initially attempted to present the public image that it had the political will to effectively reconstitute the Ethiopian state, but it demonstrated that the autocratic tendencies of the revolutionary movement that it had been, continued to predominate in the thinking of the EPRDF leadership.⁹ Although it realized that it would not be able to rule alone, and that a ruling coalition would have to be created, it was unwilling to adopt a genuine power-sharing formula. Moreover, it did not engage in a frank dialogue with

other members of the pact who signed the Charter to agree on the basic rules of the political game during the transitional period but instead attempted to control and manipulate the group in a hegemonic fashion. Consequently, radical leftist groups such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement, along with several conservative Ethiopian nationalist groups such as the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF) and MEDHIN were left out.

As it began to articulate its agenda, it seemed that the EPRDF was aware of the extreme need to engender a sense of its commitment among Ethiopia's disparate nationality groups to a final resolution of the national question. This was demonstrated in the Charter. Among other things, the Charter asserts the right of all of Ethiopia's nationalities to self-determination, the preservation of the national identities of each group, and the right of each nationality to govern its own affairs within the context of a federated Ethiopia. In addition it states that, local and regional administrative units will be defined on the basis of nationality. Two possible implications of these policy directions were: the end of the notion of a unitary Ethiopia, and the devolution of political power rather than centralization, as had been the case with all previous modern Ethiopian regimes.

However, in reality, history has demonstrated that the EPRDF's conception of the right to self-determination for constituent states is much closer to that of Stalin than anything else. The regime seems to hold that ethnic states have the right to self-determination but not the right to exercise that right. In addition, by breaking up Ethiopia into large units based on ethnic identity, the EPRDF actually enhanced its statist powers. Since Tigrayans make up only about seven percent of the Ethiopian population, the EPRDF could not hope to rule without forming a coalition government. It is the most organized among the political movements. Politics is organized along ethnic lines, and opposition parties mostly are based upon ethnic appeals. However, the EPRDF has a Tigray and Amhara core, and it has created or coopted other political groups based in other ethnic groups. For example, 43 of the 53 members of the Supreme Council of the EPRDF belong to the predominantly Tigrayan TPLF and the predominantly Amhara Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM).¹⁰

It was clear by early 1994 that by virtue of being an incumbent party, with its satellite organizations, the EPRDF was able to suppress possible threats from exclusively ethnically - based opposition parties. For example, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), was created by the EPRDF, and it has its base of support

in the same areas that the OLF has its base. What are the implications of this situation for those who support the idea of self-determination for the Oromo people? Before we answer this question, we need to understand the process of the development of Oromo nationalism and its essence.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF OROMO NATIONALISM AND THE QUEST FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

The strategy of the EPRDF in dealing with its most serious ethnically-based opposition is to "divide and conquer." It has created a party, the OPDO, that serves as a counterweight to the OLF. This move is complemented by the fact that the Oromo, rather than having a long history as a nation-state, are a people in search of a nation or a distinct national identity. Let me turn briefly to an analysis of the origin and development of contemporary Oromo national identity.

Ethnonational identity has two fundamental dimensions, a subconscious and a conscious dimension. Orlando Patterson refers to these as existential and ethnocentric ethnicity.¹¹ Existential ethnicity refers to the subconscious image that individuals have of belonging to a given ethnonational group. Ethnocentric ethnicity refers to a conscious sense of the self and his or her relationship to the ethnic group. This latter form of ethnicity is contingent upon the existence of other ethnic groups and interactions of one's own group with others. Patterson suggests that historically, ethnocentric ethnicity came about as a result of 1) the emergence of the kin-based hegemonic state; 2) the recognition of ethnic groups of imagined or real threats from other groups; and 3) growing ethnic group interactions through trade.¹² With the emergence of the nation-state and the expansion of intergroup trade, political leaders found the need to instill in their subjects a sense of "us" and "them." Where no enemies or ethnic competitor existed, they were invented. Through culture, contact, wars of conquest and trade, an Oromo national identity was initially formed. However, the nation was never coterminous with a single Oromo state.

The Oromo view their original homeland as the southern highlands of present-day Ethiopia.¹³ It is known that between the 12th and 15th centuries, they were already organized into two confederations known as the Barentu and Borana federations. It was during this period that Oromos began their expansion from their homeland area in all directions. Today, all Oromo subgroup trace their heritage to one of these federations.¹⁴ Rather than being a pure ethnic group, the Oromo are comprised of descendants of individuals who, even

when they were not of pure Oromo stock, willingly accepted or were forced to accept an Oromo identity. Jalata notes that the Oromo historically increased their numbers through the assimilation of other peoples they conquered.¹⁵

The assimilation process was facilitated by the institution of a unique administrative system among the Oromo known as *gada*.¹⁶ Although there was historically no one, unified Oromo nation-state, there was a distinct Oromo nation, and that national identity was intertwined with the institution of *gada*. Oromos claim that *gada* is a classic example of a traditional African form of democracy. Legislative, executive, and judicial functions were independent of one another but were integral components of a "nationwide" system of governance. Importantly, however, there was never a single bureaucratic state that governed all Oromo clans and clan families.

The *gada* was a generation-grade system based on sequence of eight calendar year periods. At anyone time, there existed five *gada* "parties" or generational groups. Once in the system, it took individuals forty years to complete the cycle. Every eight years, "party" members moved from one *gada* level to the next until they completed service. At each stage *gada* members were educated in Oromo history, military strategy, law, and governance. Every eight years a nine-member presidium of the *gada* party entering the fifth level was elected on the basis of adult male suffrage. After serving as leaders, individuals were retired but continued to act as advisers to ascendant leaders.

This system of governance is thought to date as far back as five hundred years, but by the mid-nineteenth century it had begun to break down.¹⁷ Some suggest that the system had simply become outmoded, but there are several more plausible explanations for the decline of the importance of the *gada* system. The system worked best among pastoralist Oromo, and was less popular among those who practiced mixed farming. Another possible cause was the replacement of traditional religions with Islam or Christianity, but perhaps most important were prohibitions imposed by the colonizing Amharas.

By the mid-sixteenth century the Oromo had penetrated as far north as the core of what was then known as Abyssinia. They established their own ethnic enclaves mostly in the central part of Abyssinia, and although they preserved much of their traditional culture, they selectively borrowed and adapted a great deal of the Abyssinian culture to suit their needs and tastes. As long as they remained in their enclaves, the Oromo were able to preserve some elements of their traditional culture and thus to maintain their distinctiveness. But in certain instances where they penetrated

Abyssinian strongholds such as Gojjam and Begemder—usually as prisoners of war or as royal retainers—they were more fully integrated into Amhara society, often intermarrying with the Amhara and accepting the Christian religion. Significantly, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the already substantial political influence of the Oromo in the Amhara core increased dramatically. However, this was immediately followed by the virtual demise of a centralized state of Abyssinia. When the state was finally able to begin reconstructing itself in the mid-1800s, the Amhara had clearly gained the upper hand. Successive emperors beginning with Tewodros in 1855 up to Haile Selassie with the support of their European and American collaborators suppressed Oromo national identity for more than a century.

The Oromo consider the latter phase of Abyssinian hegemony over them as a colonial experience. As a result of the imperatives of Abyssinian colonialism, the Oromo pastoralists and peasants have become Ethiopian subjects. Rather than conserving the surplus of their production for use exclusively within their own communities, they were required to share their produce with alien feudal landlords and local collaborators of the empire-state. In some cases they were forced to adopt the Christian religion; in others they turned to Islam often as a reaction to the culture of their oppressors. The vast majority of the Oromo came to see the Amhara and the state they represented as colonialists, bent on exploiting them and stripping them of their culture.¹⁸

During his rule, Emperor Haile Selassie maintained a policy of attempting to secure Oromo fealty through the development of alliances with certain Oromo leaders. The most favored among the Oromo were those who chose to become totally assimilated or Amharized, often adopting Christian names. Historically, the ruling families of Wallaga and Shagar Oromos were the most receptive to this approach, but as Haile Selassie became more concerned with firming up the boundaries of the modern state and its bureaucratic authority in the periphery, other Oromo leaders were assimilated.

The majority of the Oromo were viewed as mere subjects. They were regularly victims of corrupt bureaucrats and judges, all of whom invariably tended to be Christian northerners.¹⁹ In the distribution of scarce resources, Oromo needs were considered secondary to those of the dominant Amhara groups as a matter of course. The inferior status accorded Oromos and their culture must be considered along with the fact that Oromo areas were the backbone of the Ethiopian economy.²⁰ These areas were the main sources of the empire's chief export crops (coffee, oil seed, hides and skins). The Oromo areas also provided the emperor with his most

valuable distributable resource, land. All Oromo land as a result of the imperial conquest had become Crown Lands, and was used by the Emperor to reward or remunerate those in his service. Moreover, Oromo, whether peasants or pastoralists, were saddled with a heavy cash tax burden in an economy that had yet to become market-oriented.

Another profound effect of the colonial experience on the Oromo was the sharpening of their sense of national identity. Before this time the Oromo had expensive interaction with the Amhara, but never as members of an Amhara-dominated nation-state. After the mid-20th century, however, they found themselves subjects of Amhara overlordship in a world that was now organizing itself along the lines of nation-states, with permanent and inviolable geographic boundaries.

The Oromo did not always accept Amhara hegemony. In fact, sporadic local revolts were endemic throughout the period of Ethiopian colonialism. Several major incidents, however, stand out: the Azabo-Raya revolt, 1928-30; the Western Oromo Confederacy of 1936; and the Bale Revolt, 1964-70.²¹ There is some question as to whether the 1928 and 1964 revolts constituted struggles for national liberation, but the specific objective of the Western Oromo Confederacy was independence from Ethiopia. Thirty-three Oromo chiefs signed a document establishing the confederacy, and expressing a desire for the region to become a League of Nations protectorate.²²

Clear signs of Oromo nationalist aspirations did not surface again until the early 1960's when an Oromo self-help association, Macha-Tulama Association, was founded. The organization, named after two of the major Oromo groups, was established in 1963 as a self-help club dedicated to promoting self-identity and improving the lot of the Oromo people in general. Since no political parties were allowed in Ethiopia at the time, such associations often took on political roles. The organization attempted to involve Oromo in both cities and the countryside. At the height of its development, the Association claimed as many as 300,000 members.²³ The leadership comprised educated Oromos who had been "Amharized" but subsequently rediscovered their culture, deciding to fight for a fair share of the spoils of modernization for the Oromo nation. The point is extremely significant: by the mid-1960s, Oromo intellectuals were not demanding an independent state of Oromia, but rather first class citizenship for all Oromos.

The most prominent leader of the Macha-Tulama Association was Taddasa Biru, a former general in the Ethiopian police force and the territorial army. He was from a Shagar Oromo family and had

become steeped in Amhara culture. In fact, his Oromo origins were not apparent to many until he began to champion the cause of his people. Taddasa Biru appeared at organizational rallies in southern towns, delivering speeches critical of the government's policies toward Oromo areas and encouraging the people to demand their just due. He carefully linked his appeal to the dignity of Oromo culture, a culture that, he emphasized, was being destroyed at the hands of the Amhara. By the late 1966, the Haile Selassie regime had become alarmed at the growth in the movement's popularity, and called for the arrest of the Association's top leadership including Taddasa Biru. The Organization was banned shortly thereafter. Taddasa Biru was tried and condemned to death; a sentence that was later commuted to life imprisonment.²⁴

The Macha-Tulama Association was significant for several reasons. From the perspective of the government, it was a clear indication that the commitment of assimilated ethnic elites was not assured. Ethnic affinities for the Oromo nation with a right to self-determination seemed stronger than their allegiance to the Ethiopian nation-state. It was also an indication that political sentiments could not be suppressed merely by forbidding political parties. The movement sensitized the Oromo to the importance of their own national culture and to the contradictions in the emerging politico-economic system.

Serious Oromo militancy, apart from the Bale Revolt, did not emerge until the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was founded in the early 1970s, dedicated to the "total liberation of the entire Oromo nation from Ethiopian colonialism."²⁵ The organization claimed to be more a progeny of the primary proto-nationalist resistance of the Oromo people than of the Macha-Tulama Association or the Bale Rebellion. The OLF began an offensive against the Ethiopian government in Hararghe Province in 1973, but sustained activities did not occur until 1976, after the collapse of the Haile Selassie regime. It subsequently spread its activities to Bale in the south and Wallaga in the west.

Although the Oromo people can trace their history back to time immemorial, they have only recently developed a sense of national consciousness. In fact the sense of Oromo consciousness like that of the Eritreans, is a product of the colonial experience.²⁶ Since the 16th century the main factors defining the Oromo identity are a common language and a common ancestry. Historically, the Oromo people have been divided into clans and monarchies, with the terminal political community being the clan or the kingdom. At no point in their history were all of the Oromo people citizens of a state of Oromia.²⁷ Oromos in different parts of Ethiopia had dif-

ferent colonial experiences. Some were more or less incorporated into the Ethiopian state, and had differential perceptions of being "Ethiopians First," and Oromos second or vice versa.

During the struggle against Mengistu, the OLF had only limited success in mounting an effective military challenge. This was due to in part the vast territory occupied by the Oromo and the inability of the Front to communicate its message over this territory in a reliable and regular manner.²⁸ Military successes were episodic and mostly in border zones. Hassan has pointed out that the fact that the Oromo people tend to be landlocked, and not able to rely upon friendly borders across which they could retreat for a safe haven, have been historically vulnerable to stronger and better armed enemies such as the Ethiopians and the Somalis.²⁹

In 1991, the OLF invested faith in the EPRDF, but quickly found out that there was no real commitment to power-sharing, only to the practice of "divide and rule" that had characterized previous regimes. This strategy was clearly evident when in August 1995 the newly-elected Council of People's Representatives unanimously elected OPDO leader, Negaso Gidada, to become the President of the newly formed Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. This is a figurehead position, as the Prime Minister holds primary executive power; it is significant that there was a conscious effort to win legitimacy for the new government among the Oromo.³⁰

Possible Options for the Oromo and the Current Ethiopian Politics

The dilemma now facing the Oromo people is to either cooperate with the EPRDF, to oppose it through constitutional means, or continue an armed struggle. The matter is complicated not only by the strong position of the EPRDF, but also by the fact that the Oromo people are still working on the nation-building project. Whether the decision is to oppose the ascendent regime through constitutional or military means, a lack of unity works against the Oromo movement.

Of the two options, the military option would seem to be the least viable at this time for the same historical reasons that were mentioned above. At the same time, the second option is bound to be frustrating since the EPRDF is prone to make it difficult for viable opposition to develop. Yet, the only real chance of success in opening up the Ethiopian political system for not only the Oromos, but for other "out" groups as well, is the formation of a coalition to challenge the EPRDF behemoth. Success in democracies comes through coalitions of minorities rather than through ethnic hegemony.

In a recent USAID report, Political Scientist Samuel Huntington, retreating to his political modernization paradigm of three decades ago, suggests that Ethiopia is destined to have its politics organized along ethnic lines, and that the route to democracy would have to go through the ethnic playing field. The problem for Ethiopia and its political leaders, he contends, is to demonstrate their commitment to parties and administrative decentralization based upon ethnicity while at the same time not being committed to an **ethnically based government**.³¹ In other words, the pact should be broadened and it should come to be characterized by an inclusiveness that allows for the proportional representation of the most significant ethnic groups in important political positions. Huntington goes on to argue

[The] attempt to classify people by ethnic background is reminiscent of practices which used to exist in the former Soviet Union and in South Africa. It seems totally contrary to a political process one of whose purposes is to promote a common Ethiopian national identity. It also seems inappropriate in a country in which a substantial portion of the population are of mixed ethnic background or unsure of which ethnic group they belong to or wish to identify with . . .³²

Another indication of the illogicality of the decision to break Ethiopia up into ethnically-based states is the fact that there had never been a tradition of ethnically-based regions. Haile Selassie's aim had been to create a multiethnic Ethiopian nation-state. However, his mistake was to attempt to achieve this objective through the establishment of the hegemony of the Amhara culture masked as "Ethiopian" culture. The empire was held together by force and co-optation rather than by widespread consensus that all constituent groups were integral and equal parts of one multiethnic nation.

Some observers claim that the creation of the Federal Republic, organized into ethnically-defined regions, is destined to further polarize society. They suggest that a negotiated power-sharing arrangement should have taken place prior to the making of the new constitution and the formation of the new government. The EPRDF seems more bent on maintaining statist control than anything else. Evidence of this could be seen in the manner in which the Constituent Assembly that promulgated the new constitution was chosen. The elections for this Assembly were procedurally correct, but political participation was not broadly inclusive. Those organizations that might have offered views contrary to those of the EPRDF and its supporters had either been systematically excluded

from the electoral process before the June 1994 elections, or they had willfully decided not to participate. The EPRDF had skillfully structured politics so as to present the illusion of democracy while at the same time maintaining tight statist control over society.

Opposition forces have continued to attempt to coalesce in order to force the EPRDF to open up the political system. For example, in December 1993 all major opposition groups including the OLF, the All-Amhara People's Political Organization (APPO), and COEDF participated in a conference for National Peace and Reconciliation. Although the EPRDF regime allowed the event to occur, some participants from outside the country were arrested when they arrived at the Addis Ababa Airport, and others were subjected to official harassment. Moreover, the regime did not participate in the conference and did not accept its resolutions. The main resolution offered was a demand for power-sharing.

Following this, the Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE) vigorously attempted, to no avail, to halt the constitutional process until the political system was truly open, and all-inclusive. Eventually CAFPDE, like other major opposition groups, boycotted the national elections leading up to the formation of the Federal Republic.

The EPRDF appeared to feel that its position was strong enough for it to resist a disorganized opposition, particularly when opposition groups did not have strong allies in the international community. By contrast, the international donors, rather than pressuring for multiple political parties and a meaningful democratic contest, seemed content with better governance. That is, as long as the government is transparent, efficient, effective, and accountable to the donors themselves, they seem ready to relax the conditionality of progress toward democracy. Consequently, opposition forces are deprived of what had once been a potentially valuable ally in the process of opening up political space.

CONCLUSION

Breaking Ethiopia up into a few large ethnically based regions, does not solve the nationality problem, but exacerbates it. This is particularly the case where large, ethnically-based states are concerned. Power could be devolved to states that are relatively ethnically homogeneous but smaller and avoid the complications created by the promise of self-determination based upon large nationality-based states. From its very inception, the modern state of Ethiopia was designed to be a multiethnic unitary state. As was the case with past regimes, the formula of rule adopted by the EPRDF requires

state coercion and co-optation in order to maintain the semblance of national unity. For those observers who expected Ethiopia to move directly from revolution to democracy, this is surely a disappointment. However, there are those such as Samuel Huntington, and perhaps even some elements in the international donor community, who are reluctant to pressure the EPRDF to democratize, as long as it can insure political stability. Political stability is seen by such observers as a prerequisite to economic growth, and in the short run the perceived economic growth is preferable to democracy. The current social and political policies of the EPRDF are designed mostly to enhance the statist control of the EPRDF.

Notes

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3. Donald Levine. *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 181.
4. Christopher Clapham. "Centralization and Local Response in Southern Ethiopia," *African Affairs*, 74 (January 1975), pp. 73-76. Clapham found that between 1944 and 1967 of 156-high ranking officials in the imperial bureaucracy only three came from the six southern provinces where the Oromo predominate and only two were Somalis.
5. *Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release* The Ethiopian Government Aide Memoire, November 14, 1963.
6. Asafa Jalata. "Ethiopia and Ethnic Politics: The Case of Oromo Nationalism," in *Dialectical Anthropology*, 18 (1993), pp. 381-402.
7. E. J. Keller. *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, pp. 191-212.
8. Edmond J. Keller. "Remaking the Ethiopian State," in I. William Zartman, ed., *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*. Boulder: [CO]: Lynne Rienner, 1995, pp. 125-139.
9. Marina Ottaway. *The Ethiopian Transition: Democratization or New Authoritarianism*, (unpublished paper 1994); Theodore M. Vestal, *An Analysis of the New Constitution*, (unpublished paper 1994); and Lencho Letta, *The Making and Un-making of Ethiopia's Transitional Charter*, (Unpublished Paper 1994)
10. Oromo Liberation Front, USA Office. *Oromia*, Mar 1994, pp. 16.
11. Orlando Patterson. *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse*. New York: Stein and Day, 1977.
12. O. Patterson. *Ethnic Chauvinism*, pp 44-45.

13. Mohammed Hassen. *The Oromo of Ethiopia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. xiii.
14. Asafa Jalata. *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992*. Boulder, [CO]: Lynne Rienner, 1993, p. 16.
15. A. Jalata. *Oromia and Ethiopia*, p. 16.
16. Asmarom Legesse. *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society*. New York: The Free Press, 1973.
17. E. J. Keller. *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, p. 159.
18. Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa. *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa*. Trenton, [NJ]: The Red Sea Press, 1990.
19. P. T. Baxter. "Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo," in *African Affairs*, 77 (1978), pp. 283-99.
20. After the Second World War the name of the state was changed from Abyssinia to Ethiopia.
21. Patrick Gilkes. *The Dying Lion*. London: Julien Friedmann, 1977, p. 206.
22. A. Jalata. *Oromia and Ethiopia*, pp. 53-54.
23. P. Gilkes. *The Dying Lion*, pp. 225-6.
24. Marina and David Ottaway. *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*. New York: Africana, 1978, p. 91.
25. "Oromia Speaks: An interview with a Member of the Central Committee of the Oromo Liberation Front," in *Horn of Africa*, 3 (1980), p. 24.
26. A. Jalata. *Oromia and Ethiopia*.
27. Mohammed Hassen. *The Oromo of Ethiopia*; and Herbert Lewis, *Background for Ethiopia: Ambassadorial Seminar*, (Unpublished Paper, 1994).
28. Herbert Lewis. *Oromo Political Culture and Ethiopia's Future*, (Unpublished Paper, 1993).
29. M. Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*.
30. Reuters News Service, August 22, 1995.
31. Samuel Huntington *Political Development in Ethiopia: A Peasant-Based dominant-Party Democracy?* Report to USAID/Ethiopia," (May 1993).
32. Samuel Huntington. *Political Development in Ethiopia*, p. 15.

chapter six

Peculiar Challenges to Oromo Nationalism

Leenco Lata

The discovery, by the world powers of the largest ethnonation, Oromos who inhabit the largest area in the Ethiopian empire, dates five hundred years after Columbus's 'discovery' of the Americas. Many American and European government officials whom I met after the 1991 change of a regime in Ethiopia, repeatedly told me of their lack of awareness of the existence of the Oromo people and of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) prior to the London Conference of May 1991.¹ This was particularly true of American diplomats and other officials. In fact, most of the members of the American team that was delegated to mediate the London talks of May 1991 frankly admitted their ignorance about Oromos until that time. Subsequently, they continued to identify that event as their initial exposure to Oromo politics.

The US Ambassador to Ethiopia, Irvin Hicks, from 1993 to 1996, was one of them. He had actually spent some years in Ethiopia during the late 1950s and was posted as a diplomat to a number of other African countries in the 1980s. Despite such prior exposure to Ethiopia and the rest of Africa, even he was unaware of the existence of the Oromo people and the struggle that they were conducting until 1991.