

The Iron-Fisted Ethiopian State

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A political crisis of longstanding duration has been brought to the world's attention by the actions of a competitor at the recently concluded Olympic Games. Marathon runner Feyisa Lilesa's gesture of raising his arms aloft in the form of a cross as he was about to confirm his silver-medal position was a politically-motivated one intended to highlight the plight of the Oromo people of Ethiopia who vehemently claim to be perpetually marginalised by the country's central government.

The Oromo also claim to be the primary victims of an escalating crackdown on public dissent. But while the Ethiopian government strenuously contests the facts and figures behind each repeated claim by local human rights groups and international non-governmental organisations of mass incarcerations, torture and extra-judicial killings, the picture emerges of a nation perennially at struggle in the quest towards achieving a genuine democracy and the rule of law. Whatever the merits of the arguments positing the clash of ethnic interests, ideological fractiousness and contestation of social policy, Ethiopia's political history is one that is replete with episodes of ethnic or ideologically-motivated dissent which have typically been met by violent counter-reactions on the part of those wielding the levers of central power; whether by its overthrown monarchy or by its military and civilian successors.

The iron-fisted approach to managing the affairs of state adopted by successive Ethiopian governments has always been predicated on the idea of preserving a multi-ethnic polity seemingly at any cost, much to the extent that the critics of the present administration accuse it of being insensitive to the genuine grievances of its citizens and of being unable to appropriately distinguish between protest and insurrection. This heavy-handed approach, some commentators contend risks plunging Ethiopia into a serious ethnic-based conflict that would not only mirror the violent transformations in its own recent history but which may also undertake the devastating features of conflicts as have occurred in neighbouring Sudan and Somalia and even Rwanda.

When Ethiopian rebels succeeded in overthrowing the hardline Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, the succeeding political framework, that of a federation of nine ethnically-based states, was hailed as a model for the African continent. The constitution granted autonomy to the constituent parts of the country and included a clause providing for the right to secede. The apparent success of this system, apart from the separation of Eritrea, was according to Meles Zenawi, evidence of "the successful management of our diversity."



Zenawi, the leader of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which defeated Mengistu's forces, had been speaking as prime minister twenty years later. Under his leadership, Ethiopia's marked development of infrastructure was accompanied by official data indicating consistent annual economic growth. A poverty assessment provided by the World Bank in 2011 found that poverty had fallen in the country from 44 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2011. The report also stated that average household health, education, and living standards had improved over the same period of time. The regime received a boost in July of 2015 when on a state visit US President Barack Obama had repeatedly referred to the "democratically elected" government of Ethiopia.

Nonetheless the apparent progress made in development and democracy under Zenawi's Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has for long been underplayed by the opposition. They charge that the theoretically impressive constitutional arrangements were negated by the authoritarian nature of Zenawi -who died in 2012 after 21 years as leader- and continues to be undermined by his chosen successor, Hailemariam Desalegn. The true state of affairs according to Bulcha Demeksa, an outspoken opposition figure, is that the federal powers designated to the regions have been effectively usurped by the national government; claiming at the time Zenawi was in power that he removed regional presidents "at will".

There is much in the way of evidence of the authoritarian ways of the Ethiopian government, dominated by the EPRDF, since the deposing of the Mengistu regime. This came into sharp focus at the time of multi-party elections held in 2005. The opposition's complaints of election fraud were backed by the view of election observers from the European Union and the Carter Center. The elections of 2010, was also mired by claims of voter intimidation while that of 2015, which saw the EPRDF winning a landslide of 500 out of the 547 available seats -with its allies winning the remaining 47- was described by the opposition as an "undemocratic disgrace" and offered proof that Ethiopia is "effectively a one-party state". The result is that not a single opposition member presently sits in the Parliament of the country possessing Africa's second largest population.

The EPRDF is also in full control of the security apparatus. The military, the police force and the intelligence services, dominated by ethnic Tigrayans, serve as ultimate guarantors of its survival. The government has also made use of vaguely drafted counter-terrorism laws to clamp down on dissent. An article in the European Scientific Journal published in January 2016 claimed that at least eleven journalists had been convicted and sentenced to periods in excess of ten years since the enactment of Ethiopia's Proclamation on Anti-Terrorism in August of 2009. Whereas the situation before the passing of the anti-terrorism legislation was that no laws contained provisions overtly criminalising the standard activities of opposition journalists and politicians, Article 6 of the Proclamation typifies the draconian

nature of the law by allowing for a broad-brush policy which enables the authorities to interpret all manner of activities as 'encouraging terrorism' by direct or indirect means. It is a tool used to diminish freedom of speech, association and assembly by criminalising the role of opposition politicians, journalists and bloggers, as well as the work of environmental and human rights activists. This view is supported by the United States State Department which in April of 2016 called for an end to the government's use of the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation law "to prosecute journalists, political party members and activists".

Another piece of allegedly 'anti-democratic' legislation among a welter passed during this period was the Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2008. This restricts Ethiopian non-governmental organizations from embarking on any human rights-related work if they receive their funding from foreign sources.

Critics of the government also point to its brutal handling of recalcitrant populaces in various regions much to the extent that certain external human right organisations such as Genocide Watch and Human Rights Watch have alleged that the consistent use of lethal force and other extreme measures in the provinces are fulfilling a range of criteria which when taken in sum are considered to amount to genocide. This applies to the Anuak people of Gambella province as well as to the inhabitants of the regions of Ogaden and Oromia.

The Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia who comprise around a third of the country's population, have consistently complained of being marginalised in a country where the exercise of political power is traditionally viewed through the prism of the rivalry between the Amhara and Tigrayan ethnic groups. A 2009 report by the Advocates for Human Rights organisation documented a historical account of consistent human rights abuse against Oromo communities by three successive regimes: that of the Haile Selassie-led monarchy, the Marxist Derg of the Mengistu era and the present EPRDF government. Oromo groups often characterise the treatment meted to their communities as an enduring form of state sanctioned tyranny. In October of 2014, Amnesty International produced 'Because I am Oromo: Sweeping repression in the Oromia region of Ethiopia', a 166-page document which asserted that between 2011 and 2014, at least 5,000 Oromos had been arrested based "on their actual or suspected peaceful opposition to the government." This frequently involved taking pre-emptive action. Dissenters, both actual and suspected, it claimed had been "detained without charge or trial (and) killed by security services during protests, arrests and in detention."

The Ogaden region, scene of a large scale battle between the armies of Ethiopia and Somalia between 1977 and 1978, is composed of ethnic Somalis, a great many of whom live impoverished lives in an underdeveloped expanse of land which is richly endowed with oil and gas resources. Its people also accuse the national government of severe human rights abuses including enforced displacements from ancestral land, restriction of large groups to camps, starvation and massacres of civilians and suspected militants. The management of a blockade of the region and the camps established for internally displaced person has involved regulating the availability of food and water. It has meant starvation while rape and intimidation are claimed to be weapons used by the Ethiopian military in keeping the people in line who have suffered from dispossession of their lands which have been turned over to Chinese-run oil and gas projects.

The Anuak of the Gambella region, a resource rich and fertile area which is situated to the west of the country on the border with Sudan, have also suffered from government policies.

The region does not appear to benefit from the oil and agricultural projects the government has leased to foreign interests. Instead this mainly pastoral people, dark-skinned Africans traditionally treated as inferiors by the lighter-hued Highlanders, have suffered from enforced displacement from their lands and were subjected to a notorious series of massacres by the army and Highlander militias in the early 2000s.

The case made against the Ethiopian regime is both frequent and compelling. Nonetheless, context is required before reaching a final judgement. Ethiopia, is the descendant state of a multi-ethnic empire with a remarkably turbulent history. Although seen by outsiders as an Abyssinian entity with an Orthodox Christian identity, the Amhara, Tigrayan and others of the *Habesha* ethnic strain amount to no more than 35% of a total population which accommodates over 80 different ethnic groups. Further, although it vies with Armenia for the honorific of the first Christian nation, nearly 45% of Ethiopians practise the Islamic faith. It is under these circumstances that in the cause of maintaining its nationhood that Ethiopia has arguably inevitably developed a brand of authoritarian leadership; one which is perhaps synonymous with the Russian concept of *zheleznaya ruka* (*orsilnaya ruka*): rule by the iron fist. Such a rationale will of course be of cold comfort to those groups such as the Oromo who although forming part of the lineage of the imperial family (both of Emperor Haile Selassie's parents were paternally of Oromo descent) have had to endure restrictions on forms of their cultural expression; a culture based before incorporation into the Abyssinian empire on the *Gadaa* system which they proudly hold to be an exemplar of traditional democratic social, political and economic governance. The parallel institution of *Siqque* is claimed to have promoted gender equality.

In 2010, the Economic Intelligence Unit described the Ethiopian government as an "authoritarian regime" when ranking the country in 118th place out of 167 on its 'Democracy Index'. If the present rulers of Ethiopia do privately admit to the necessity of conducting the task of nation building with a strong hand, they should be aware both of the limits of its severity and of the need to reassure their countrymen by demonstrable policies that their governance is not predicated on the perpetuation of a form of ethnic hegemony. For it is the argument of many of its sternest critics that the EPRDF is dominated by the TPLF which as a guerilla force played the decisive role in defeating the Mengistu government and gaining effective control of the country. They only need to look at their history and that of Ethiopia to be aware of the dialectic of violence that is inevitably unleashed when the hatred and injustice borne of ethnic chauvinism exceeds the limits of tolerance. The Woyane Rebellion of 1943 in Tigray province which was eventually crushed was one which was directed at the Amhara-centred regime of Selassie. And it was a coalition of ethnic militias which conducted the fight against the tyrannical rule of Mengistu.

It would be remiss to fail to elaborate further on the achievements of the EPRDF alluded to earlier in regard to the reduction of poverty as well as improvements in both health and education. High on the list of projects which if brought to fruition would serve to be genuinely transformative in its effect is that of the 4.2 billion dollar Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This 6,000 megawatt gravity dam situated on the Blue Nile will be the largest hydro-electric dam on the African continent. It is being constructed under a longstanding threat of war by Egypt, a country which relies heavily on the waters of the River Nile. But the Ethiopian government is dogged in its pursuit of a scheme which has the potential to bring a great many of its citizens out of poverty.

The government's Productive Safety Net Programme through which people can work on public infrastructure projects in return for food or cash provides jobs for around 7 million

people. The effects of drought are combatted with more effectiveness than previous regimes through a national food reserve and early warning system located in all the *woredas*, that is, local government districts. There have also been productive initiatives made in relation to tackling the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Alongside the iron-fisted style of governance is some evidence of flexibility. The so-called 'Master Plan' aimed at extending the capital city of Addis Ababa was scrapped in the face of protests from the Oromo community who viewed it as a ploy by other ethnic groups to uproot them from their fertile land under the guise of development. In an unprecedented display of independence, the Oromo component of the EPRDF, the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) announced in January of 2016 that it was resolved to "fully terminate" the plan.

The government has also shown a good level of resolve in asserting Ethiopian national interests; its defiance of Egyptian attempts at intimidation over the GERD project being a notable example. And while the legislative stipulation contained within the Charities and Societies Proclamation regarding funding from external sources appears primarily geared towards stifling internal dissent, it can also be viewed as a prudent act aimed at protecting the Ethiopian state from foreign interference of the sort that has enabled intelligence services of certain countries to utilise non-governmental organisations to destabilise other nations. The successful rescue by Ethiopian defence forces of Aneuk children abducted by members of the south Sudanese Murle tribe in the Gambella region where groups of Murle had massacred hundreds of people was also a laudable act done in the national interest. The country is shaping itself in a position to be a key player in regional affairs with its expected role as energy supplier to its neighbours as well as through its peacekeeping efforts under the auspices of the African Union/

That said, it is also clear that the heavy-handed approach to governance needs moderating lest it succeeds in triggering an uncontrollable level of violence. Violence is of course a phenomenon to which generations of Ethiopians are familiar with.

The pattern of intermittent bloody insurrections and coups against the old imperial regime continued under its successor, a military regime whose initially bloodless coup which overthrew the monarchy in 1974 transmogrified into a train of unceasing violence. Commencing with what came to be known as 'Black Saturday', it was followed by the internecine struggles within the junta, known by the amharic word for 'committee', the Derg. The assassinations first of General Aman Andom and later Tafari Benti paved the way for the rise of Mengistu as the overseer of the 'Ethiopian Red Terror.' During this period, in which between 30,000 and 750,00 were killed, Mengistu fought an internal war against two civilian Marxist parties: the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON). It is worth noting that the Ethiopian Civil War which concluded with the 1991 sacking of the Mengistu regime is officially designated as having started in September of 1974. Since that time, the government has had to cope with a range of low-intensity insurgencies which presently number ten.

The onus is on the government to begin to mould a genuinely inclusive national philosophy which eschews the perennial preoccupation with securing and maintaining ethnic hegemony. The country needs to evolve beyond the present facade of federalism, for there is ample evidence of truth in the cynical interpretation of Zenawi's words on the "successful management of our diversity" as a euphemism for the successful supervision of a divide and conquer strategy. An inability to tackle ethnic grievances risks plunging Ethiopia into a level

of darkness commensurate with or even exceeding that which occurred during the Rwandan genocide. The monopoly of state arms on the part of one ethnic group offers no guarantee of continued peaceful co-existence among Ethiopia's disparate ethnic groups if those on the receiving end perceive their national army to be an 'interahamwe' of sorts.

If not corrected, Ethiopia risks ratcheting the dialectic of violence to a level which would imperil its continued existence.

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