

Unequal Ethiopia: Is it sustainable?

Background

Ethiopia is a country of multiple contrasts. It is a country characterised by a dramatic differences in land forms adjacent to one another. These differences in geographies, altitudes and climate have shaped the behaviour of the societies and dictate the mode of livelihood that they pursue. The fundamentally different livelihoods create different kind of societies with different values, social structures and consequently different perceptions, histories and political power. The divide between the highlands of the country and its lowlands is the boundary between the settled cultivation and mobile pastoralism, hence dividing different cultures built on different foundations, their history of which is filled with prejudice and hostility.

Traditionally, the right of access to land in the highlands is attached to membership in a kinship or to a village. In contrast to this, extensive use of land and freedom of movement over it determines the pastoralists' perspective of land rights. Christopher Clapham associated the high incidence of conflict within the country with the ways in which such different societies have been brought into direct and brutal contact with one another.

John Markakis divided Ethiopia into three clearly defined zones – namely the highland core, the highland periphery and lowland periphery. The highland core (or the Abyssinians, primarily Amharic and Tigranya speakers) employs a stratified, highly authoritarian social systems, in which hierarchy rather than collaboration between the equals, is the guiding principle. The perception is that power is respected from below insofar as it can be shown to be effective from above. Indeed, any deviation from these subversive norms is considered as rebellion.

Inhabiting the same physical environment, communities in the highland periphery have a good deal in common with the highland core societies who became their overlords. The highland periphery constitutes the highland Oromo and a large number of different groups, which under the current constitutional order are grouped together as the “Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State”.

The right place of the Oromo in the political configuration of Ethiopia has been obstructed by the ruling groups, who constructed the national political system. Similarly, the diversity of the Oromo hindered the emergence of common identity with which the ideas of Oromoness could be expressed, further weakening their influence in the political decision making processes.

Makuria Bulcha wrote that, despite the fact that the ruling systems lacked the institutional capacity to disseminate their cultural and linguistic components widely among their (new) subjects, the traditional Oromo elites, particularly those in Shoa, Wallega and Wello had submitted to their rulers. In addition, some educated Oromos and others also used assimilation as a strategy for survival and advancement in the system. It is however, important to note that significant proportion of Oromos and particularly those in Bale, Hararghe and Arsi resisted the Amharisation process and succeeded to maintain their traditional systems and values.

However, it is important to note that, with the political change of 1991 and the adoption of ethnic based federal system, the sense of Oromonnes has increased sharply. Note that while OPDO¹ represents the Oromo interests, it is a member of the ruling EPRDF coalition which is assumed to stand for the overall national interests impartially.

The societies in the lowlands, and particularly Somalis, Afars and the Oromos in Bale and Haraghe have fiercely resisted the assimilation attempts and successfully maintained a culture marked by egalitarianism, in which relations of hierarchy are minimal and political authority is correspondingly hard to maintain. Authority is largely obtained through certain attributes personal to the individuals, such as knowledge, wisdom or the embodiment of some wider cause.

With such different cultures, social structures, perceptions, histories and political power, Ethiopian societies have experienced constant conflicts and confrontations. But as expected, neighbouring communities have developed their own local conflict resolution mechanisms, through which they could address such disagreements.

¹ Oromo Peoples Democratic Organisation

How is situation now?

Despite the fact that the politics in Ethiopia has been dominated by ethnicity, its role in finding solutions remain controversial. The Ethiopia of today was born from the military conquest, where many conquered groups were markedly excluded from the national political system. The country's nation-state building strategies after conquest had been carried out by attempting to assimilate other ethno-linguistic groups into the core culture of the empire builders. The strategies employed by the successive Ethiopian governments have sought to transform the heterogeneous groups into a homogeneous Ethiopian nation and have never considered the creation of a new identity. The regimes invested considerable efforts in erasing ethnic identity of the conquered peoples and replacing it with an Amhara identity.

After the overthrow of the military regime in mid-1991, the EPRDF-led government adopted a federal system, which seeks to answer the demands and rights of the country's divergent ethnic groups. With constitutionalising ethnic federalism, the system attempts to find an appropriate state structure that could be used to manage the complex ethno-linguistic diversity of the country, by ensuring equality among the various ethnic groups, while maintaining unity and providing a political mechanism for addressing ethnic tensions.

However, the governance system that the constitution proposes do not match the one that has been put into practice. More importantly, the constitutional promise to provide all regional states of the country with equal opportunity has been translated into practice in an unequal manner. As with the previous regimes, the EPRDF-led government has been grappling with the fact that the political and socio-economic inequality between the different societies of the country is growing fast. In addition, the political and socio-economic inequality among the regional states leaves the poorer, under-represented, peripheral states further behind.

Some of the critics to this ethnic federal approach argue that organising politics around ethnicity foments ethnic tensions and violence, endangering ultimately the unity of the national politics. The critics considers ethnic federalism as unsuccessful initiative which failed many Ethiopians who wish to identify themselves first as Ethiopians instead of their ethnic background. But it is very crucial to acknowledge that this argument has itself an ethnic dimension, as unsurprisingly, those who would like to identify themselves as Ethiopians before

their ethnic identity share ethnic background with the empire builders, who sought to impose their culture, values and language on others. This means that this group would practically endorse the creation of a homogeneous Ethiopia that practises the culture and language of the Amhara. It is interesting to note here that in late 1969, Wallelegn Makonnen (in his article “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia”) equated Ethiopian nationalism with an Amhara and to a certain extent Amhara-Tigre supremacy. He envisaged an Ethiopia in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs, one in which every nationality is given equal opportunity and one in which all nationalities are treated equally – an Ethiopia where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally.

In addition, some of the ethno-nationalist groups, Oromo and Somalis in particular consider the current system nothing more than a mere continuation of Abyssinian domination but under the supremacy of the Tigrian elite instead of Amhara.

In a politically and socio-economically unequal Ethiopia, the historically marginalised societies, with the exception of Oromo and (to a certain degree) the Southern Peoples are relatively less informed about the political direction of the country and have limited or no opportunities to understand and participate in the political processes of the country. They are excluded from the discussions of the political agendas in which the collective national goals are decided. Similarly, the marginalised Ethiopians lack the necessary access to the forums in which the best way to achieve these goals are analysed and decided. They are conspicuously absent from the federal institutions, bureaucracies and the security sectors, and consequently, their interests and preferences have less weight in the political decision making processes. As inequality among the nations and peoples is increasing sharply and social cohesion is decreasing steeply, a growing number of Somalis, Afar, Binshagul-Gumuz and Gembella, just to name a few, feel that they are marginalised and belong to the periphery of society. Note that differences in ethnicity coincided with economic and political differences can cause resentments and violent conflicts. There are surely, clear frustration and widespread discontent resulting from the discrepancies between the constitutional provisions and the reality on the ground. If not appropriately and timely addressed, the perceived disparity between the collective communal aspirations and their actual political and economic status may trigger radical actions and conflicts. Logically, the sought-after unity can be forged and trust created between the different ethnic background if the differences are accepted, grievances acknowledged and equality ensured and safeguarded through institutional means.

The Oromo-Somali conflicts: the case in point

Many nations, nationalities and peoples who have distinct tradition, history, and culture call Ethiopia as their homeland. Inequalities, political or otherwise, among the different ethnic groups of the country are relative (rather than absolute), based on the situations of the societies under consideration, whose statuses are to be compared. For example, while Tigrians and Amhara continue to be at the top of the political pyramid, the Oromo are in a much better position in the hierarchy than the Somalis in Ethiopia. Thanks to the position of the OPDO in the EPRDF, unlike Somalis, the Oromo are represented in every federal institution and political making forum.

It is crucial to note that everything that exists has certain connection with the past, and no matter how new it appears to be, it carries some of the history with it. The position that Ethiopian Somali speakers have found themselves in today's Ethiopia has a lot to do with the past.

For instance, it was not an accident that in his attempt to answer the question of “what are the people of Ethiopia composed of?” Wallelegn Makonnen put the Somali nation in unique and undesirable position. Listing some of the nationalities in Ethiopia, he said that “*in Ethiopia there is the Oromo nation, the Amhara nation, the Tigre nation, the Wellamo nation, the Adere nation, the Gurage nation, the Sidama nation and, however, much you may not like it the Somali nation.*” Another example is when during the 1973 – 74 disastrous drought, a provincial medical officer demonstrated Ethiopian government disregard for Somali victims by reasoning that “people have always starved down in the desert and help has never reached them before.” More importantly, in a letter to Belata Ayele Gebre, (the governor of Harerghe) Emperor Haile Sellasie considered Somali region as nothing more than the fence of Ethiopia. The emperor wrote:

ጌት ያለ ስጦር ስይቀመጥም ለኢትዮጵያ ዋና
ካጥቶ፣ በጣሊና በረሃው ይወ

The statement emphasises clearly that the region is outside the main part of the house and should be treated as such. Similarly, and perhaps more distressfully, the recent reactions by the government and the oppositions alike to the ongoing conflicts between neighbouring Ethiopian

Somali speakers and the Oromo communities expose the painful fact that some are more Ethiopian than others.

The Oromo and the Somali Ethnic groups have been living together peacefully and maintained constant interactions of various forms for centuries. Surely, localised conflicts over water points and grazing lands were common and the two communities had developed effective mechanisms with which such conflicts could be addressed. The emergence of the regional states and the political inequality that came with it worsened the situation. The Somali and Oromo regional states share over 1000 km long border and frontier communities have worked out symbiotic arrangements in which they have managed to live together. The majority of the communities occupying the interface between the two regional states are bi-lingual and inter-marriage and cultural blending are common. A significant proportion of these people did not think of themselves as Somali or Oromo – they would rather identify themselves as Issa, Gabra, Borana, Garre etc. However, the issue of identity was raised when the demarcation between the regional states came.

Most likely, due to the political inequality between the two regions, overwhelming majority of the disputed areas were decided for the Oromo. Even to further expose the political power disparity between the two regions, Moyale voted in favour of the Somali, but the Federal Government has yet to implement the decision of the people and the district is still considered as disputed area – damaging the credibility of the government as an impartial body.

In the recent conflicts, in which over hundred individuals have lost their lives and tens of thousands have been displaced, the federal government institutions, the opposition figures, the ESAT TV and the local media analysts have, intentionally or otherwise, twisted the facts. For example, the government's Spokesman, Dr. Negeri Lencho has recently announced through the national media that **hundreds** of Oromo **and some** Somalis have been killed in the conflict between the two regions. Unfortunately, the spokesman appears to have forgotten that as a federal entity and a senior member of the ruling EPRDF, he was supposed to represent all Ethiopians, regardless of their ethnic, political or religious backgrounds. While I do not have the exact figures, I strongly believe that there are more Somali casualties than the Oromo – at least the figures are conservatively comparable. To the surprise of many, there are more Somalis displaced from their homes than the Oromo. This fact is even supported by the data collected by the federal government and international NGOs. In addition, while overwhelming

majority of the displaced Oromo are youths who sought job opportunities in Somalia and Somali region, the displaced Somalis are those who identified themselves as Somalis during the demarcation process – this means that they are being evicted from their ancestral homes.

Similarly, the Foreign Minister of Ethiopia Dr, Workneh Gebeyahu has recently visited Jijiga. As part of the visit, the Minister went to Wajale, where about three thousand Oromo returned from Somaliland were camped. But on his way back from Jijiga to Harer, Dr. Workneh failed to ask the situation of the thousands of the displaced Somalis who have been sheltered in Qollechi, just few kilometres from Babile toward Jijiga. Yes again, the respected Minister is an Oromo, but he is also an executive member of the ruling organisation, sitting the forums and discussions in which very important national agendas are decided. Can the minister represent the interests of all Ethiopians, including Somalis, rationally and impartially? Would he be biased against the Ethiopian Somali speakers in international forums, in which he attends, as Ethiopian top diplomat?

In addition, in its Editorial, the Addis Standard Magazine published on September 27, 2017 an article titled as “Ethiopia is Grappling with Heightened Risk of State Collapse, It is Time for Orderly Transition”. The article cannot be more biased and misinforming. For example, it argues that the conflict between the two communities escalated in February and March of this year as the Somali *Liyu Police* have intensified the incursions against the Oromo civilians. The article continued its apparent misinformation by claiming that in August and September at least 60 Oromo civilians were killed in Oromia region by the members of the Somali *Liyu Police*. The fact that the Magazine failed to mention, let alone condemn, the Awaday and the less publicised Gelemso incidents, in which dozens of Ethiopian Somali were massacred cold-bloodedly and callously is enough to expose the biased nature of the Magazine. The victims were Awaday and Gelemso residents. Some of them, even their heartbroken Oromo mothers could not save them.

On September 26, 2017, Zecharias Zelalem posted an article titled as “Oromo-Somali Conundrum: Can Ethiopia Tame the *Liyu Police*?” in Opride.com web page. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Zelalem’s article is heavily biased and while mildly condemned the Awaday massacre, he ashamedly tried to justify it. For example, the author of the article stated that civilians have been displaced on both sides, but immediately jumped to take side and sympathise with the Oromo victims alone by claiming that thousands of Oromo residents and merchants fleeing

Jijiga have taken refuge at a makeshift shelter in Harar. While I am not arguing against this claim, it is obvious that Mr. Zelalem has undermined the horrible status of the thousands of Somalis displaced from their homes by the Oromo authority. Similarly, the author appears to have intentionally avoided to mention the Gelemso incident, in which on September 22, 2017 a dozen of Somali residents were slaughtered. On many occasions, the author quotes Addis Standard and the announcements made by the Oromia and the Federal Government's Spokesmen as his source of information, on which he based his analysis. Surely Mr. Zelalem admits that he suffers from lack of independent and credible reporting on the causes and consequences of the latest incidents – thus garbage in garbage out.

In his attempt to distribute blames, Mr Zelalem has unfairly singled out the Somali region president Mr. Abdi Mohamud and the *Liyu Police* of the regional state. Of course there is a conflict in which two systems are participating. Blaming one side without credible information and investigation is short-sightedness. Who are killing the Somali civilians in the Oromia region? What causes thousands of Somalis to flee their homes? What is the role of the Oromia authority in the conflict? What about if the conflicts are occurring in the Somali region territories – then who is attacking who? Credible reports have stated that while, in front of the Prime Minister, Mr. Abdi Mohamud has pledged to shoulder the responsibility of any action taken by the Somalis against the Oromos, Mr. Lemma Megersa, the president of Oromia region, has refused to take similar responsibility.

More surprisingly, Mr. Zelalem accused the Federal Government of not being impartial in the conflict. Firstly, it is important to define what the federal government is. As stated earlier, Somalis and other marginalised communities are cruelly under-represented in the federal institutions. They are absent from the forums in which important decisions that affect their lives are made. More specifically, when Mr. Lemma Megersa is present in the executive committee meeting of the EPRDF, for example to discuss about the causes of the conflict, Mr. Abdi Mohamud does not have that opportunity to present his version of the story.

Another important issue raised in the article is the fact that Somali region has long been a home to insurgencies and that the Italian invasion in Ethiopia in 1935 started in Somali region (and Wal-Wal locality in particular). But what is the relevance of these issues in the current Oromo-Somali conflicts? Is the author trying to associate the regional president and the *Liyu Ploice* with those incidents?

I would finally conclude this brief assessment and analysis by emphasising the importance of political and socio-economic equality among the different ethnic groups of the country. That is what the constitution guarantees and that is what is required if the unity of Ethiopia is to remain intact. Otherwise, Article 39 of the constitution has been put there to address the communal discontents caused by actual or even perceived marginalisation and inequalities.

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