

Ethiopia: a nation at a crossroads

By Shimelis Amare

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Hope or despair, a bright future or a looming darkness, a prosperous united Ethiopia or a fragmented tribal land—these are the choices Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people are currently facing. As clear as these choices are, depending on the path we take, as a people, we will rise or we will go down. At this critical political juncture, the question is, therefore, what is to be done?

No doubt that the current ongoing economic development offers a promising future; no doubt that the current government is committed to overcome poverty and to transform this nation; no doubt that the people are excited and energized to do their part so that this nation will become the best place for its inhabitants. Even though it is not fully realized and we still have a long way to go, when we notice a limited free press that exist in the country, when we notice that different opposition parties are legally functioning, when we notice that free expression and debates among the citizens are taking place, there is no doubt that if this process continues in a peaceful way, a democratic system founded on constitutional liberalism is achievable in our life time. There is no doubt that this is exciting time in our history. However, ethnic based federal system established by this government has created a fertile ground for a narrow-minded thinking to take root, and it is coming home to roost. Indeed, Ethiopia is at a crossroads. Unless we try to undo some of the mistakes, what was achieved will be lost, this nation will become a fragmented tribal land, and its people will be exposed to a devastating civil war. Before it is too late, it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to engage in a responsible and constructive conversation. Instead of pointing finger, this is the time to pause and reflect on the journey we took so far.

The question we need to answer is that, after twenty years experiment of ethnic based federalism, is there a lesson learned? Did this arrangement cause identity crises or help us to know who we are as a people? Is this arrangement becoming a continuous treat which will eventually lead us to civil war or is it helping us to co-exist as one nation, and as one people? Is this arrangement helping the developmental state policy to succeed or is it becoming a bottleneck? How can we defuse this narrow minded thinking so that we can move forward? Regardless of our political views and affiliations, the current political climate in the country urges us to evaluate the consequences of ethnic based federalism.

What happened in most of the universities in the Oromia region recently cannot be seen lightly and it cannot be seen as one separate incident where the government can manage by arresting a few. The root of this problem must be understood so that the solution can be found. There is a good reason why these campuses became grounds to ignite ethnic based movements. Currently, the Ethiopian youth under thirty years old are the ones who grew up under this ethnic based federal arrangement; they identify themselves as Oromo, Amhara, Tigre, etc., and they didn't

grow up feeling as Ethiopian-Oromo, Ethiopian-Amhara, Ethiopian-Tigre, etc.. This narrow-minded ethnic based thinking has overshadowed Ethiopian identity. Instead of learning what they have in common with the rest of Ethiopians, these young Ethiopians grew up in their respective region learning what makes them different from the rest of the people. If there is no a national language they learn starting from elementary school, how do they communicate with each other? If there is no civics lesson that highlights our common history, our rights, our duties, our responsibilities to each other, etc., how do they learn citizenship? If they don't learn that our culture and our heritage is blended together and cannot be separated, how can they identify as Ethiopians? How can they see that our destiny, as a people, is inseparable? If preaching hatred and erecting a statue of a woman with one of her breast cut-off is considered as civics lesson, how can this young Ethiopians see that our future is depend on each other? Indeed, the root of the problem is ethnic based federal arrangement, and the way these young Ethiopians are raised. Instead of advancing as a civilized society, this arrangement is taking us backwards. Unless we recognize this problem and find the solution for it, civil war is not only possible, it is inevitable.

When we examine our history, we can see that not only the boundary of our country, but also the ethnic composition of the population has continuously changed. Through the years, living together and through intermarriages between different ethnicities, our identity as Ethiopian became the reflection of this union. After all these years, nothing defines us better than the Ethiopian identity. We all should claim this land of ours as our habitat, and one ethnicity or tribe should not assume that a portion of this country belong only to one tribe. Yes, through this process of nation formation, terrible things happened, but wisdom should guide us to understand these events within the historical context. Before Menelik moved to the south, years ago, it was the Oromo tribe who moved aggressively and took over most of the areas. In fact, this particular period changed the ethnic composition of the Ethiopian society. If they had stayed stronger, our history could have been related to Oromo's domination instead of Menelik's expansion. The question is, therefore, if we continue complaining about the past, where do we start and where do we stop? Do we need to go back a few centuries and complain about the Oromo expansion or do we have to go back a century only and complain about Menelik's domination? Which part of our history is convenient to support our argument? Does this approach really help us to move forward?

When we look at the history of nation formation throughout human history, we can easily understand that, for most part, the history of man is the history of war; and the stronger always dominates; this is our history, and Europeans have similar history as well. Europeans used to fight each other continuously before they realized that this behavior doesn't take them anywhere and decided to move forward. We must also find a closure for what happened in the past so that we can move forward. We should learn from history, but we should use it as a reference, not as a determining factor for our future. We may not like some of the things that happened in the past, but we are where we are now; living together all these years, we created unbreakable bond. After all these years of intermarriages, most of us and our extended families do not belong to one

ethnic group alone. If there is one identity that describes us as a people, it is our Ethiopian identity, our common heritage, our common history.

In the twenty-first century where people are globally connected to advance together, no one with a reasonable mind should propose fragmentation as a solution. Not only for this poor nation of ours, but also for a wealthy nation like the United States, fragmentation doesn't offer a better outcome. That is why we must realize that article thirty-nine of the constitution is not a solution, but a growing cancer. If it cannot be amended at this time, at least the sentiment must be defused, the ground work must be done to amend it, and this government must assume full responsibility to reverse the course. Making a mistake is one thing, but refusing not to learn from it is quite something else. To avoid fragmentation, the federal system should be region-based instead of ethnicity-based, and this nation should belong to all Ethiopians and no area should belong to a single ethnic group alone. To move forward, establishing one national language, revising the education system, focusing on the youth to make sure that they grow up knowing who they are as Ethiopians must be a primary task of this government. Otherwise, every time ethnic based violence erupted, if the government sends federal police to calm-down the situation, it can be seen like an arsonist who tries to put-off a fire he himself started. This government should realize the grave danger the country is facing and act quickly. If not, sooner or later it will be forced to conduct referendum once again, or it will find itself contradicting with its own constitution.

We must recognize, however, this responsibility cannot be left to the government alone. Opposition groups must constrain themselves from utilizing these ethnic based movements to advance their causes. To avoid civil wars in our country, responsible citizens of this nation from all regions and ethnicities must come together and shoulder this historic responsibility; a constructive conversation to defuse this narrow-minded sentiment must be a primary task.