

The Scottish Referendum vindicates EPRDF

(Abera Demessie Sep 2014)

The detachment of doomsayers opposition camp from reality may not be a news anymore. From party politics to parliamentary elections, from national development issues to national security concerns, they proved themselves as an adamantly unable to grasp logic and unwilling to be swayed by the reality on the ground that demonstrated time and again the scientific and nuanced policy directions and leadership wisdom of the EPRDF.

The recent development, however, surpasses imagination and borders on insanity.

As we observed this month, the nation of Scotland held a referendum to decide whether to stay or to leave the family of nations that make up the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That was a shock to the Ethiopian opposition who incessantly accuse EPRDF for conceding to Eritrea's referendum and recognizing the right to self-determination of nation and nationalities in the Constitution of The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Now, the Scottish people voted in favor of unity. And, now they are trying to spin the outcome of the Scottish referendum.

However, there are several important points in the process that are noteworthy and that debunked the baseless accusations of the opposition against the EPRDF.

The first and the most common of the accusations of the opposition camp is that EPRDF should not have allowed a referendum in Eritrea. Some of them go to the extent of conjecturing conspiracy theories pointing to that referendum as an evidence of EPRDF's intend to dismember Ethiopia.

Interestingly, the government of United Kingdom agreed to the referendum in the absence of an explicit Constitutional provision for the right to secession. In 2012, when the leader of the administration of Scotland announced it will hold a referendum in autumn 2014, the government of United Kingdom did not resort to legal and military means to suppress them rather accepted their right to do so.

The rationale behind the decision can be summed up in the statement by Prime Minister David Cameron¹:

"The Scottish National Party was elected in Scotland in 2011 and promised a referendum on independence.

"We could have blocked that, we could have put it off but just as with other big issues, it was right to take - not duck - the big decision.

"I am a passionate believer in our United Kingdom - I wanted more than anything for our United Kingdom to stay together.

"But I am also a democrat. And it was right that we respected the SNP's majority in Holyrood and gave the Scottish people their right to have their say."

The situation in 1991 in Ethiopia was even more compelling. The Derg military government had collapsed and the dictator had fled the country. There was no legitimate constitutional order or political credibility to serve as an excuse to suppress the demand from Eritrea. In fact, Eritrea had become a defacto independent country as PFDJ had captured Asmara and declared independence a week before EPRDF entered Addis Ababa.

The EPRDF-led transitional government of Ethiopia didn't rush to recognize Eritrea's premature announcement of independence. Yet, it did not adopt the militaristic adventurism suggested at home by the remnants of old-fashioned politics were actively pushing against Eritrea's succession.

As the EPRDF had advanced a established political culture free of adventurism and sentiment, it took a rational decision to endorse the Eritrean right for self-determination, despite its reservations about the leadership and organizational quality of the then insurgent group, now Eritrean ruling party, PFDJ.

The EPRDF understood the lives of the two people cannot be improved with an endless war driven by adventurism and sentimentalism. Therefore, the right course was to let the Eritrean people determine their destiny and work together whatever the outcome of the referendum.

The second, accusation of the opposition camp is the process of the referendum of Eritrea was wrong. Indeed, the process might not have been ideal, but nothing significant that could have altered the outcome of the referendum. After all, a team of observers by the United Nations approved the process as free and fair.

However, the more important points are the question on the ballot paper and eligibility to vote².

The opposition camp routinely claim that the ballot paper was inappropriate because it gave the choice of "freedom" or "slavery".

When confronted with the fact that that is a make-believe story and the question on the ballot was "Do you want Eritrea to be independent?", they claim that question is no better than "freedom or slavery" choice.

Interestingly, the ballot paper of the Scottish referendum was phrased in similar fashion. The Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013 specified on Section 1 states that³:

(1)A referendum is to be held in Scotland on a question about the independence of Scotland.

(2)The question is- "Should Scotland be an independent country?".

The same goes with regard to the incessant claim of the opposition camp that all Ethiopians should have been given the opportunity to vote on Eritrea's referendum. That was an illogical claim intended to disguise their hostility to the right of self-determination, as demonstrated in the Scottish referendum.

As PM David Cameron said: "It is a decision solely for the Scottish people". Similarly, the renowned politician Ketty Chen noted that: "the referendum is a demonstration of democratic behavior and procedure and it is a world value that the future of a place is determined by its residents."

Indeed, some old-fashioned politicians in the United Kingdom made similar suggestions. For example: Labor's Baroness Symons called for the whole United Kingdom to be included in any plebiscite, claiming that: "*The breakup of the United Kingdom will affect all of us throughout the United Kingdom. Will we all have an equal right to have our views known and why not through a referendum?*"

However, as Lord Wallace, a former deputy first minister of Scotland, addressed the question pointing out that⁴:

"We believe that whether or not Scotland should leave the United Kingdom is a matter for Scotland and I don't think it would be good for relationships within the United Kingdom if they are being prevented from doing so by other parts of the United Kingdom".

The third point that arises in relation to the matter concerns the nature of the Constitutional arrangement of the Federal democratic Republic of Ethiopia, namely the federal arrangement and the right of nation, nationalities enshrined in Article 39 of the Constitution.

The Scottish chose to stay in United Kingdom by 55% to 45% margin, while Eritrea decided to become an independent state.

Nonetheless, in both cases it was understood that it cannot be business as usual.

In the run up to the Scottish referendum, Prime Minister David Cameron wrote an open letter stating that⁵:

There is a lot that divides us, but there's one thing on which we agree passionately: the United Kingdom is better together. At this crucial moment, we want to be listening and talking to voters about the huge choices they face. Our message to the Scottish people will be simple: 'We want you to stay.'

He pledged to give Scotland a power equivalent to a federal state saying that:

Power for Scotland over how much money it borrows, what taxes it raises, how it spends that money – all agreed by November, all put into draft legislation by January. This is the package that Gordon Brown outlined on Monday. It is one I wholeheartedly support. Because we know that brighter future for Scotland rests not only on staying in the UK, but also on having significant new powers.

Similarly, the then Chairman of EPRDF, Meles Zenawi, said in 1991 that:

Ethiopian state is valuable. It should not be destroyed. It should be put back together on a democratic basis and with guarantees of freedom and autonomy for all its peoples, so it can develop economically. Federation is the only way this can be done. We are in favor of federation. This is the only way the damage the Derg has done can be repaired.

Our own position is very delicate. We have to have good relations with Eritreans, so we recognize their right to self-determination, going as far as independence if they want it. We endorse their proposal for a referendum because we don't think there is any other solution for the situation that has developed. But we really hope that Eritrea can remain part of a federated Ethiopia.

Even if Eritrea chose to secede and Scotland chose to stay in the Union, the proposed federal arrangements remained necessary to keep the rest of the country.

That is why United Kingdom has started working on a new Constitutional settlement⁶ that will revise the powers and relations of its constituent parts⁷.

That was why EPRDF focused from day one on a political arrangement that saved the Ethiopia from the existential threat it was facing following the downfall of the Derg regime and to put her in the right track of democracy and development

The recognition of the right to self-determination in the Transitional period Charter⁸ and the Constitution made sure that Ethiopia escaped not only the immediate threats posed by the

downfall of Dergue and the empty treasury and tens thousands of small arms scattered all over the country; but also managed the more fundamental threats that arise from centuries old national operation and denial of the farmers' fruits of labor.

Not only Ethiopia safely passed the looming threats of disintegration and communal conflict, it managed to set-up a multinational federalism that addresses the roots of the problem.

The 17 or more armed groups that existed at the time of the downfall of the Derg were persuaded to lay down their arms and join the political process while their fighters either resumed their peaceful lives or joined the national army, militia and police in accordance with their qualification and skills.

National and nationalities started governing themselves and for the first time. They voluntarily renewed their commitment to live as one country by ratifying the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia through their elected representatives in 1995.

In short, the Scottish referendum is yet another proof that EPRDF's handling of the Eritrea referendum was a prudent policy choice and that enshrining the right to self-determination in the Constitution was both an effective means to bring peace at the time and a far-sighted approach that averts a future civil war on the matter.

The United Kingdom has hundreds years of democratic culture, therefore they were able to handle the Scottish demand in a democratic fashion smoothly. However, the same cannot be expected in Ethiopia without a safety valve in place.

As the Great Leader former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said:

"some countries may afford to say we will cross the bridge when we get there. But we would rather make preparations in advance to make sure that we will cross the bridge safely without unnecessary surprises and difficulties".

That is why *the Constitution of The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia* clearly provided the rights of nation, nationalities and peoples in Article 39. It reads:

Article 39 Rights of Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples⁹

(1) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession.

(2) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history.

(3) Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the

territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and Federal governments.

(4) The right to self-determination, including secession, of every Nation, Nationality and People shall come into effect:

(a) When a demand for secession has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Legislative Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned;

(b) When the Federal Government has organized a referendum which must take place within three years from the time it received the concerned council's decision for secession;

(c) When the demand for secession is supported by majority vote in the referendum;

(d) When the Federal Government will have transferred its powers to the council of the Nation, Nationality or People who has voted to secede; and

(e) When the division of assets is effected in a manner prescribed by law.

(5) A "Nation, Nationality or People" for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.

¹ David Cameron statement on the UK's future - BBC - www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-29271765

² Heather Green: Prisoners and Other People: the Right to Vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill > Scottish Constitutional Futures Forum
<http://www.scottishconstitutionalfutures.org/OpinionandAnalysis/ViewBlogPost/tabid/1767/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/1951/Heather-Green-Prisoners-and-Other-People-the-Right-to-Vote-in-the-Scottish-Independence-Referendum-Franchise-Bill.aspx>

³ Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013 (asp 14) -
http://www.bailii.org/scot/legis/num_act/2013/asp_201314_en_1.html; Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013 -<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2013/13/section/2>

⁴ BBC News - Scottish independence: SNP dismisses expat voting call - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-16607480>

⁵ David Cameron's passionate about the Union in personal Mail article | Daily Mail Online -
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2749933/Don-t-rip-family-apart-Cameron-gets-passionate-Union-highly-personal-article-Mail-warns-no-going-Yes-vote-wins.html>

⁶ Cameron promises new constitutional settlement for entire UK -
<http://www.breakingnews.ie/world/cameron-promises-new-constitutional-settlement-for-entire-uk-642517.html>

⁷ Independence referendum: Gordon Brown's 12-point plan for Scotland - Daily Record
<http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/independence-referendum-gordon-browns-12-point-4187106>

⁸ The Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia - <http://chilot.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/the-transitional-period-charter-of-ethiopia.pdf>

⁹ Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia | በጠ ልበልግ
<http://abookmedhin.wordpress.com/2010/12/26/constitution-of-the-federal-republic-of-ethiopia/>