Ethnicity, Democratisation and Decentralization in Ethiopia: The Case of Oromia

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ETHNICITY, DEMOCRATISATION AND DECENTRALIZATION IN ETHIOPIA: THE CASE OF OROMIA

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Abstract: The 20th century has been shaped by class and national struggles intended to end the asymmetrical relations that arose in the historical process of the creation of the multi-ethnic polity of Ethiopia. This study explores and assesses the democratization and decentralization experiment in Ethiopia. It focuses on the Oromia region, which is the country's largest region as well as housing its single largest ethnic group. It describes the demand of the Oromo people for self-rule and democratic governance on the one hand, and the promises made on paper by the government in power, on the other. It concludes that the Oromia region is a classical case in terms of the degree of failure of the regime's policies on the national question and the continued struggle for real autonomy and democracy on the part of the local population.

1.   INTRODUCTION

In the historical continuum that informs the 'making and remaking' of modern Ethiopia, the second half of the 19th century was shaped by the wars of incorporation and state formation on unequal terms. In many major ways, class and national struggles, intended to end the asymmetrical relations, have shaped the second half of the 20th century. In other words, while the wars of the 19th century were for the 'making' of modern Ethiopia, the struggles of the 20th century were for the reversal of the same historical process that created the multi-ethnic polity of Ethiopia. The class and national struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that precipitated the revolution of 1974, the struggles that led to the change of regime in 1991, and the ongoing struggles for self-rule and democracy were and are all part of the 'remaking' of Ethiopia.

A closer look at the nature of the perennial struggles for the 'remaking' of Ethiopia clearly shows the centrality of the competing ethnic nationalists'

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claims for an equitable share of power and resources under the command of the state (Merera 2002). A further observation also reveals that, in the same way the regional autonomy formula of the military regime which was informed by and presented as a socialist project failed to address the competing claims, the present regime's ethnic-based federal set-up, designed along a liberal democracy trajectory, appears to be failing to produce the desired result. What is being implemented as democratization and decentralization of power by the new regime to address the demands and claims of the country's diverse communities seems to be leading to a dead-end. The central problem is the contradictory actions of the regime, its democratization and decentralization policy on paper and centralization in practice, which has failed to make a major departure from the country's past autocratic/authoritarian political trajectory. Democratization and decentralization in the Oromia region, which is the focus of this study, is a classical case in point, in terms of both the degree of failure of the regime's policies and the continued struggle for real autonomy and democracy on the part of the local population.

This study explores and assesses the democratization and decentralization experiment in Ethiopia by weighing the demand of the Oromo people for self-rule and democratic governance on the one hand, and the promises made on paper by the government in power on the other. The central argument of this study is that the top-down approach of the ruling party, which is inspired by its hegemonic aspirations, is seriously impeding the hoped − for democratization process and the decentralization of power thereof.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was an empirical investigation of the direction and content of the democratization/decentralization initiative in Ethiopia since 1991. It has assessed the practical implementation of the host of policy initiatives of the present regime in relation to the democratization/decentralization drive. Furthermore, by looking at the emerging institutions of governance, the study has explored to what extent the decentralization policy has led to the empowerment of ordinary citizens by promoting meaningful political participation, which is a *sine qua non* for a transparent, accountable and democratic government.

The study has also examined the ongoing democratization/ decentralization experiment from defined goals: the quest for real autonomy and democracy by the country's varied ethnic groupings and the response of the state to them.

The researcher made several field trips to several *woredas* (districts) of the Oromia region for data collection. He held interviews with key informants, as well as conducted focus group discussions in Ambo, Waliso, Gerar Jarso, North Shewa, Walenchiti, East Shewa, Arsi and Jimma. Additional data were collected from Borana, Bale and Harar through research assistants, and from official reports and publications.

3. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: THE LINKAGES BETWEEN DEMOCRATISATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

With the end of the Cold War, which appears to have led to the historic opening that Huntington (1993) has characterized as "The third Wave of Democratization", liberal democracy and the attendant free enterprise have become the ideological justification for both the legitimizing of the state by the regime in power and the social movements fighting to redefine the state. However, in spite of the subscription of the hegemonic forces controlling the state and the opposition to the 'liberal political philosophy', controversy often arises on the question of democratization and democracy, at both the theoretical and practical levels. The controversy is much more serious under situations of ethnically divided societies where political demands and their articulations easily take the ethnic fault-lines.

The controversy over theory arises as the result of competing interests, which leads to competing conceptions of democracy. The central issue in such controversy is whether individual rights or collective rights should be given primacy in the political restructuring of the state. The central question here is whether ethnic and/or cultural pluralism can serve as the basis for political pluralism. Academics who have ventured to write on identity politics are divided into three broad categories. Academics in the first group totally reject ethnicity as a basis of political organisation of any democratic polity. Those in the second group support the accommodation of demands and claims of nationalities in one form or another in the constitutional engineering of a democratic polity. Those who belong to the third group take ethnicity as a 'liberating ideology', and ethnic-based political restructuring as a panacea for the present political quagmire found in much of Africa.

Ironically, in the arguments against ethnicity being the basis of democratic governance, there is a convergence between the liberals and the leftist scholars. For instance, Keane (1995) and Fukuyama (1994) argue against ethnic nationalism as a basis of democratic transformation from the liberal standpoint, while Milazi (1996) and Mafeje (1999) strongly argue against ethnicity from the Marxist tradition. In this connection, Mafeje, who

is one of the strongest opponents of rights based on ethnic collectivities, writes:

> Political crisis in Africa has nothing to do with imagined, invented or real tribes or ethnic groups. It has to do with struggles among modern African elites for power at the national level. These are centered in the African capitals and not in the African hinterlands. The people in the hinterlands are only used as voting cattle or cannon fodder ... To achieve this; the various elites invoke primordial sentiments. Hence, the unwary can be deluded into thinking that the issue is 'tribalism' and 'ethnicity'. Properly understood 'tribalism' and 'ethnicity' are ideological ploys, stratagems, cunning culturally informed maneuvers so as to gain political advantage. This is an instance of the worst kind of political cynicism wherein the supposed leaders are prepared to sacrifice unsuspecting masses of people for their own immediate and mundane interests (1999, 68).

In a dramatic contrast to Mafeje, Mohamed Salih (2001), who writes from a liberal perspective, sees in ethnicity the untapped potential which, if used, can help as path-breaking in addressing the emerging debate around the triple quest of Africa: 'peace, democracy and development'.

Here, what is important to note from the outset is that, in the linkage between ethnicity and democracy, several thinkers advise the cautious approach – a middle road between total dismissal of ethnicity as an instrument of elite manipulation and the extolling of it as a panacea of all the ills of multi-ethnic polities. Nnoli (1995), Markakis (1996), Nabudere (1999) and Ghai (2000), among others, argue for a balanced approach to ethnicity. Ghai (*Ibid,* 18) especially, underlines the need for *"autonomy arrangements ... negotiated in a democratic way"* to ensure the much needed democratic governance, political stability and meaningful economic development in multi-ethnic states. In an attempt to establish a linkage between democracy and real autonomy, he further notes that, "d*emocratic structures are necessary for the exercise and protection of autonomy*", and that "*democratic politics in a region both compel regional leaders to protect autonomy as well as empower them to do so*" (*Ibid,* 22). In fact, the most serious pitfall in the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization process is the absence of 'democratic politics' in the ongoing experiment.

To make sense out of the general debate on ethnicity and its linkage to democracy, arguably dismissing ethnicity as wholly evil appears to be counter-productive, while extolling it as a panacea for the crisis of multi-ethnic societies may be a recipe for disaster. Credible evidence to both extremes abounds; evidently, the major source of crisis of states in much of Africa is the attempt to suppress ethnic identities and the demands thereof by force, where the Ethiopian case is a good example of both. The Ethiopian novelty is recognizing ethnic rights to the full constitutionally

while using naked force to suppress the same demands on the other. Here, a point that should not be missed in any intellectual venture to understand ethnicity is the paradox that surrounds identity politics. Ethnicity has got a propensity to lead to conflict when it is suppressed by the state and a propensity to lead to conflict in the event of democratizing the state and society. The latter creates a condition for claims and counter-claims, rising expectations and hegemonic aspirations which, in turn, create a double pressure on the democratizing polity (Merera 2002). Hence, the problem of democratizing and decentralizing the Ethiopian state partly emerges from such a paradox.

Yet another area of controversy is the rationale for decentralization and its linkage to democracy. Put differently, despite the existence of a general consensus among most scholars that decentralization means "devolution of power" to local level authorities or "sharing of power" with local authorities, serious discrepancies have continued to occur between theory and practice. The basic problem here is the contradiction that arises because of the hegemonic interest of the dominant forces that generally favour central control and the aspirations of the local population for real autonomy under a democratic government. The dominant forces' propensity for central control generally leads to a situation Illy (1995,10) calls 'decentralisation within centralisation' which, in the final analysis, is new forms of central control through local agents. When seen in such a light, as we shall see further down, the Ethiopian experience can be characterised as "decentralization within centralization".

In the emerging literature regarding the process of democratization and decentralization/federalism, there is a general agreement among Ethiopian scholars on the need to decentralize power in a manner that promotes efficiency, transparency, accountability and, above all, popular participation in governance at all levels of government structures. However, there is little or no unanimity regarding both the present state of affairs and the future direction of the experiment. For instance, Asmalash (1997) and Tegegne (1998) are cautiously optimistic; Meheret (1998) expresses serious doubts while Merera (2002) draws a gloomier picture of the democratization and decentralization drive under the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The focus of this paper is on drawing up the balance sheet of the Ethiopian experiment against the promises made in theory and the practice on the ground by taking the Oromia region.

4. THE HISTORICAL SETTING: THE GENESIS OF THE OROMO QUESTION

4.1 Modern State Formation in Ethiopia and the Incorporation of the Oromos on Unequal Terms

When the process of the creation of a modern multi-ethnic empire-state[1] started by Tewodros around the 1850s, Ethiopia had been under feudal anarchy for over eighty years and central authority existed only in name (Bahru 1991). The dream of Tewodros was to unite Ethiopia by ending both feudal anarchy and the supremacy of the Oromo elite during the period. In fact, although the then dominant mobilizing factors were religion and region, Tewodros was the first modern Ethiopian ruler who explicitly recognized the ethnic factor in his project of empire building and consciously challenged the supremacy of the Oromo princes over the Abyssinian kingdom. Thereafter, ethnicity was to become one of the key factors in the *modus operandi* of the Ethiopian State, although it remained as an undercurrent up to the 1960s.[2]

After a brief period of Yohannes' rule in 1872, a new power centre emerged in Shewa under the leadership of Menelik. This new power centre was destined to transform profoundly the history, geography and demography of the Ethiopian State by the turn of the 20th century (Donham and James 1986; Bahru 1991; Teshale 1995).

The Shewan expansion started in Shewa itself with the Oromo and rapidly extended to the rest of the south. One kingdom after another, and one independent principality after another succumbed to the vast Shewan army. Outnumbered, out-gunned and mostly divided, some of the local people submitted peacefully while others put up heroic but futile resistance (Bahru 1991; Addis Hiwot 1975). Menelik's campaign successfully tripled the size of the empire and brought in no less than several dozen ethnic groups of diverse languages and cultures.

The core of the power elite of the emerging empire-state was the Shewa Amhara elite, who successfully incorporated and assimilated the Oromo elite of Shewa with its three-pronged ideology of Orthodox Christianity, Amhara cultural ethos and Ethiopian unity. Once the task of incorporating the Oromo elite of Shewa into the emerging politico-military structure was accomplished, the conquest of the other regions became far easier and the whole expansion took less than a quarter of a century. Access of the Shewan army to European firearms dramatically changed the balance of

force and the role played by firearms appeared decisive, especially from the Oromo nationalists' perspective[3] (Asafa 1993).

Outside of Shewa, Menelik and his generals extended the war of conquest to the west, east and south. Menelik won a decisive victory in 1882 at the Battle of Embabo, in today's Western Oromia. This opened up western Oromo lands whose rulers submitted with little or no resistance. Four years later, Arsi fell despite tenacious resistance by its population. The fall of Arsi allowed Menelik's army to march southeast to capture the eastern city-state of Harar at the Battle of Chelenquo in 1887. The conquest of these regions gave Menelik access to real wealth - coffee and gold among other things – which significantly enhanced his political position and military might in the then emerging empire (Getahun 1974; Addis Hiwot 1975; Bahru 1991). For a century to come, the Shewan Amhara elite, the embodiment of Orthodox Christianity, the Amharic language and the Abyssinian cultural values dominated multi-ethnic Ethiopia in a manner unprecedented in the country's history.

After the creation of the empire state was completed, the creation of 'one Ethiopian nation' continued under what was then termed *Makinat* (pacification). *Makinat* involved evangelization of the local population, institutionalization of a new system of political control, and imposition of a new political class, culture and language on the indigenous population such as the Oromo. As result, new centres of political and military control, generally known as *Ketemas* or garrison towns, mushroomed across the South.[4] The cumulative effect of all these measures was exacerbation of ethnic domination that left a permanent grievance in the memory of the subjugated peoples of the South where the bulk of the Oromo population lives (Getahun 1974; Teshale 1995).

Here, one of the more enduring, repressive and damaging parts of the 'nation-building' measures was the imposition of a new type of political control in the newly conquered regions of the South (Getahun 1974; Holcomb and Sisai 1990; Asafa 1993). The conquest had been bloody and the fate of millions was left to the mercy of the conquerors. The subjugated peoples paid very dearly in land, produce and the corvée labour imposed on them. The land of the indigenous people was forcefully taken away and given to the military and quasi-military administrators and the soldiers under their command (Addis Hiwot 1975).

Furthermore, to grab the new opportunities created in Oromo areas and much of the South, the elite and the surplus population from the North flocked to these areas as administrators, court officials, soldiers, interpreters and priests. An alien system of rule, known as *neftegna* (settlers), with a new system of political, military and economic control through the

intermediary of the gun was imposed on the southern peoples (Markakis 1974; Teshale 1995). Notably, this was a vastly different system from that applied in the North, underscoring the North-South dichotomy in the country's political economy until 1974. Put differently, for the South, the outcome was a dual oppression: national as well as class. Hence, the North-South dichotomy- one polity but two markedly different systems.[5]

In this regard, Addis Hiwot portrays the following picture:

> After the creation of the multi-national empire-state by the Shewan feudal principality, especially after the conquest and the effective occupation and incorporation of the south, southwest and south-eastern areas, a classical system of feudal serfdom was established. An extensive process of land confiscation and the enserfment of the indigenous peasants took place. The religious, cultural and linguistic differences between the feudal conquistadors and the process of enserfment gave a still more brutal dimension; the aspect of national and religious oppression accentuated the more fundamental aspect of class oppression (1975, 30f).

As Addis Hiwot has correctly observed, the oppression was very severe and can be equated to 'internal colonialism', a term preferred by Oromo and Somali nationalists with the agenda of separation and adopted by several Oromo and non-Oromo academics (Donham and James 1986; Holcomb and Sisai 1990; Asafa 1993). In a nutshell, Haile Sellasie, who emerged as a real successor to Menelik, despite his Oromo blood, continued the 'nation-building' process on a much more naked and narrow ethnocratic basis. This further deepened national inequality among the varied ethnic groupings of Ethiopia which, in turn, later led to the rise of ethnic-based liberation movements (Teshale 1995; Gebru 1996).

4.2 The Rise of Modern Oromo Nationalism

By 1960 the imperial regime began to show visible signs of decay, which created a conducive condition for the forces of change to emerge. As Bahru summed up the events of the day:

> Opposition to the regime … had many facets. Peasants rebelled against increasing demands on their produce. Nationalities rose in arms for self-determination. Intellectuals struggled for their vision of a just and equitable order" (1991, 209). After 1960, the new challenges against the regime increasingly began to take the form of either class or national struggles.

Ethnic nationalism in the Ethiopian context was engendered by a century of political, economic and socio-cultural domination of the Amhara elite over others (Getahun 1974; Addis Hiwot 1975). It was shaped by the collective action of the marginalised ethnic groups against political

domination, land alienation and cultural suppression in 1960s and early 1970s (Gebru 1977; 1996; Asafa 1993). As the Ethiopian Students Movement (ESM) also recognised, the multi-faceted injustice perpetrated against the marginalised ethnic groups and the national and class struggles against the imperial regime reinforced each other. In fact, political mobilisations along class and national lines, which were to become the dominant forms of struggle in the post-1960 period, were largely the logical outcome of national and class oppression - the bedrock of most injustices under the imperial regime (Markakis 1987).

In the case of the Oromo, the first Oromo-wide movement was characterised by the Matcha and Tulama Self-help Association. This organisation, which is considered by many Oromos as the pioneer of modern Oromo nationalism, has contributed immensely to the creation of self-awareness among the Oromo youth. Although the association was immediately banned and its leaders were either killed, imprisoned or deported to solitary confinement in remote areas, the idea lived on and later was taken up by Oromo students and the younger-generation intellectuals, who totally radicalised the Oromo question by elevating it to the level of a demand for the "right to self-determination". In fact, it was at this point in time (1970 - 1974) that the ideology of the colonial thesis took shape among the Oromo elite (Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) Program 1976; Gadaa Melbaa 1980). Consequently, the colonial thesis was destined to become the major underpinning of political mobilization for most of the Oromo elite to this date (Merera 2002). After Matcha and Tulama, the Bale Oromo resistance against land alienation and unbearable taxation served as an additional catalyst for the growth of Oromo nationalism (Gebru 1977; 1996). The two movements together have constituted the genesis of modern Oromo nationalism.

4.3 Responses of the Imperial and the Military Regimes to the Demand of the Oromos

4.3.1 *The Response of the Imperial Regime to Oromo Self-Assertion*

By the mid-1960s, the Matcha and Tulama Self-help Association had begun to attract the Oromo elite of the day, which signalled to the imperial regime, both the possibility of and the oncoming danger from Oromo nationalism. The Bale Oromo uprising had further raised the spectre of an Oromo-wide armed movement against the imperial establishment. In fact, the Bale uprising was a more sustained struggle and had had a reverberating effect among the radical Ethiopian students in general and the Oromo intelligentsia in particular (Kiflu 1993).

The response of the imperial regime to the emerging Oromo nationalism was both swift and brutal. The leaders of the Matcha and Tulama Self-help Association were herded into prison, where some died and others served long prison terms. The guerrilla fighters of Bale were also disbanded and their leaders negotiated for minor posts. But, despite the ability of the imperial regime to suppress both movements, the seeds of modern Oromo nationalism had already been sown, and a more radical demand for the right to self-determination was soon to galvanize the Oromo intelligentsia and youth in the 1970s.

4.3.2 'Garrison Socialism' and State Response to Ethnic Nationalism

The Ethiopian military, with its own limitations as inheritor of imperial Ethiopia, wanted to transform the country without making a radical break with the country's imperial past regarding the national question. Not surprisingly, when they assumed power in September 1974, Ethiopia's military elite had no well-thought-out political programme of any kind, except the vague motto of 'Ethiopia *Tikdam'* (Ethiopia First). But they moved along fast with the winds of the day, and began to flirt with the civilian lefts' political agenda of a socialist revolution. To this end, they immediately adopted and declared socialism as the official ideology the country on 20 December 1974. This was meant to both capture the imagination of the revolutionary youth, who were to be sent to the countryside to organise the peasantry for the support of the unfolding revolution, and compete with the civilian left for revolutionary leadership.

According to the then prescription of becoming a revolutionary and to improve its socialist credentials, the military committee nationalized many private business firms throughout the country. Then came the March 1975 Land Reform Proclamation, which addressed the main historical grievances of the varied ethnic groups in much of the South such as the Oromo. The decree on religious equality and the separation of Church and state in Ethiopia was also part of the new regime's response to the religious/ethnic inequality perpetuated under the imperial regime (Kiflu 1993). However, a more programmatic and direct response to the rising demands of ethnic nationalisms came with the declaration of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in April 1976, in which the regional autonomy formula was included as part of building socialism in the country.

On paper, the NDR Programme was a radical proposal. However, after the departure of MEISON, which had attracted a good part of the Oromo radical intelligentsia and was believed to be the main architect of the NDR Programme, ethnic nationalism began to be portrayed as the most serious threat to the revolution. Furthermore, ethnic and regional movements were began to be castigated as counter-revolutionary forces, and the

government's propaganda machine moved against them to complement the war of annihilation unleashed by the regime to destroy them altogether. Consequently, the Eritrean movements, the Tigrayan, the Oromo and the Western Somalia liberation fronts had to face the military regime's much enhanced war machine, lavishly equipped with Soviet Union military hardware (Dawit 1989). Hence, if anything, the regional autonomy formula of the military-turned-civilian elite fell considerably short of what the various forces demanded. The end result was yet another facade for soldiers' rule (Asafa 1993). In conclusion, from day one, Ethiopia's inept military elite applied what can be termed a military method to solve all the country's societal problems, including the demand for national equality and self-rule.

5. THE POST-1991 EXPERIMENTS AND THE OROMO QUESTION

5.1 The Promises Made in the Early Years

The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), later changed to EPRDF, assumed state power in May 1991 with promises: to create a nation-state of equals by ending both the ethnic domination and centuries of autocratic/authoritarian rule (Merera 2002). It further promised to create peace and stability which, taken together, was hoped to bring about quick economic development and prosperity for all citizens of the country.

In what appears to be a practical implementation of the promises made on paper, a conference to establish a transitional government was convened in July 1991, to which some two dozen political movements, including four Oromo-based groups, were invited.[6] With the benefits of hindsight, the interest of the TPLF/EPRDF to invite the Oromo movements seemed to be less for the genuine sharing of power and more for getting the much-needed international legitimacy, as the Oromos constitute the single largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Arguably, the Oromos were also highly needed for both neutralising the multi-ethnic political organisations as well as the Amhara elite who were expected to pose a serious threat to the new regime. Whatever the real motive of the TPLF leaders, a Charter for the transitional period which openly proclaimed the "right to self determination, including secession," to the country's diverse communities was approved and an 87-Seat Council of Representatives (COR) was formed to oversee the transitional process. The executive was elected out of the COR and it was also empowered to act as a law-making body for the transitional period.

Officially, in what was said to be a response to the nationalists' demands for self-rule, a linguistic/ethnic-based fourteen administrative units (twelve regional states and two special regions of Addis Ababa and Harar)

were formed in early 1992. In the new set up, the Oromo region stretches from south to north, east to west, across much of the Ethiopian landmass. Here, it is important to note that the OLF, the biggest Oromo organisation of the time, gave its blessings to the new political engineering by the TPLF leaders. This included endorsing the controversial Charter, the composition of the TGE and the regionalization policy that followed, some of which later turned out to be a grave miscalculation on the part of the OLF leaders (Merera 2002).

The alliance between the victorious TPLF and the OLF could not last for long. What created a serious tension between the TPLF and the OLF, among others, was the contradictory aspirations of the two organisations, the former's hegemonic aspiration to recreate Ethiopia around the centrality of the Tigrayan elite and the latter's aspiration to share power comparable to the size of the Oromo people. The exhilaration of the TPLF leaders from the impressive military victory they achieved in the battlefield left little room for accommodation, while the rising tide of Oromo nationalism forced the OLF not to moderate its demands. The OLF leadership on its part appears to have calculated that it could easily mobilize the giant Oromo population against the regime. It seems the expectations of both have not materialized to date. The TPLF leaders have weakened OLF, but they could not win the hearts of the Oromos through Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), whose leaders are considered dependent at best and ex-prisoners of war in the hands of Eritrean and Tigrayan liberation fronts at worst. Hence, as it will be shown below, the political consequence of the confrontation between the two has been the frustration of the hoped-for share of power by the Oromo elite. Consequently, there is neither the democratization of the Ethiopian state nor local autonomy that could satisfy the Oromo people's quest for self-rule, but 'new authoritarianism' (Ottaway 1995) or 'tyranny of a minority' under the guise of democracy (Merera 2002).

5.1.2 The 1992 Regional Election: The First Major Test for Real Autonomy

The period between July 1991 and the regional elections of June 1992 was a crucial year for both the TPLF/EPRDF and the independent Oromo movements. The two-pronged strategy of the ruling party was to consolidate its military victory through the infamous Peoples Democratic Organisations (PDOs) on the one hand, and to initiate policies it hoped could capture the hearts of the hitherto marginalized ethnic groups. The Charter, which marked the takeoff for the two-pronged strategy, states in its preamble, that:

WHEREAS the overthrow of the military dictatorship that has ruled Ethiopia for seventeen years presents a historical moment, providing the Peoples of Ethiopia with the opportunity to rebuild the country and restructure the state democratically;

WHEREAS the military dictatorship was, in essence, a continuation of the previous regimes and its demise marks the end of an era of subjugation and oppression thus starting a new chapter in Ethiopian history in which freedom, equal rights and self-determination of all the peoples shall be the governing principles of political, economic and social life and thereby contributing to the welfare of the Ethiopian Peoples and rescuing them from centuries of subjugation and backwardness; ... (TGE 1991, 15-16)

To make the new beginning appear real, various policy initiatives, such as distribution of the council seats and ministerial posts to dozens of political groups, the linguistic/ethnic-based regionalization policy, promotion of the Oromiffa language as a working language in the Oromo areas and allocation of television and radio programmes to it, were taken.

Benefiting from the Charter that guaranteed both the right to free organisation and '*the right to self-determination, including the right to secede*', the independent Oromo movements, especially the OLF moved fast to mobilize millions, which led to the general awakening among the Oromos (Merera 2002, 176-79). Several factors have contributed to the leap forward in the otherwise slow growth of modern Oromo nationalism and mass mobilization. First, following the change of regime in 1991, several Oromo movements - the OLF, the IFLO and the UOPLF, set up offices throughout the Oromo areas. They openly incited the Oromo people to rise against the historical injustices done to them by the successive Ethiopian regimes and to lay claim to the gains to be made from the transition process.

The second major factor was the redrawing of the Ethiopian map on the basis of the ethnic/linguistic criteria. The Oromo region, which stretches across Ethiopia, began to loom large in relation to a much smaller Tigray in the north and other regions adjacent to it. The Oromo nationalists' map even includes parts of the Tigrayan region - the Rayya-Azabo areas. The relative richness of the Oromo area as well as the population size of the Oromo people gave added importance, which the Oromo elite used in their mass mobilization drive.

The third major external factor was the triumph of the Eritrean and Tigrayan nationalists. Especially, the independence of the former has had a reverberating effect both on the rising tide of Oromo nationalism as well as on the elite aspiring to lead it. In fact, the success of Eritrea and Tigray, whose population were far smaller than the Oromo population, had created

a growing expectation among the Oromo people and its elite, a temptation very difficult to resist.

The universal awakening of the Oromos immediately led to two things: the frustration and impatience of the TPLF leaders, who had hoped to easily tame and control Oromo nationalism through the OPDO, which had never been anywhere near to capturing Oromo nationalism, and the OLF leaders, who were overwhelmed by the rising tide of Oromo nationalism and had no strong structure in place to control and lead it towards the desired goals. Consequently, confrontation between the TPLF- dominated TGE and the OLF almost pushed the country to the brink of another civil war. The mediation of the Eritreans and donors did help very little to avert the looming confrontation while the 1992 regional elections further hastened the confrontation. To make it clearer, with the coming of the 1992 elections, the thin rope that tied the OLF to the TPLF-dominated TGE broke off as distrust and suspicion reached their climax. Consequently, the OLF, which was the major contender of power, was forced to withdraw from contesting the elections and subsequently from the TGE itself. This made the elections totally an EPRDF affair (NDI/AAI Report 1992).

The forcing out of the OLF from the legal political process and the continued foundering of the Ethiopian democratisation led the Oromos to a new type of political and economic marginalization. The OPDO, true to its nature as a creation by the TPLF itself, could not move beyond the structural limits and opportunities given to it by its creators, and hence has become an instrument of indirect rule, a classic case of controlling the fate and resources of other peoples.[7] As the OPDO appears to lack both the legitimacy to represent the Oromo people and the educational skill to run a transparent and accountable administration, there have been a lot of problems in the Oromo areas. For instance, human rights violations have been high, elections were seriously flawed, and economic development seems to be lagging in Oromo areas, in light of their potential for development and contribution to the national treasury.

After the local and regional elections of June 1992, several national and regional elections were held in 1994, 1995, 2000 and 2005. The 1994 elections were for a Constituent Assembly, whose role was limited to the rubber-stamping of the TPLF authored National Constitution. The 1995 elections were to bring to a close the long-delayed transition period and to manufacture public support and legitimacy for the new regime through "popular" elections as promised in the 1991 Charter. The 2000 as well as 2005 national and regional elections were all aimed at further consolidation of power by the TPLF/EPRDF.

As judged by both Ethiopian as well as non-Ethiopian scholars, and above all in the eyes of the wider Ethiopian public, all the elections were neither 'free nor fair' (Vestal 1999; Harbeson 1998; Pausewang *et al.* 2002; Merera 2002). In a nutshell, the elections which were aimed at enhancing both the democratic credentials of the new regime and its legitimacy in the eyes of the varied ethnic groupings of the country and the international community have had the opposite effect. This can fairly be summed up in the following words of a team of foreign scholars. It was written three years before the May 2005 elections, and fully exposed the regime in front of the international community:

> The problem does not lie in the constitution, or in the legal system. It lies in the political party structure. As long as the parties have no independent material base, the political interests have no independent means of expression. When all resources and means of communication, control, administration, distribution and taxation are in the hands of the ruling party through the government, there is little room for free and fair competition. When ethnic rather than political differences divide the population, and manipulation, intimidation and repression at the local level cannot be adequately corrected, there is meager hope of change, and hence no chance of accountability as between leaders and the people within a peaceful structure (Pausewang *et al.* 2002, 241).

Keller also draws the same conclusion regarding the democratization/decentralization political gimmicks in Ethiopia:

> In reality, what is billed as a 'unique form of ethnic federalism' in Ethiopia operates very much like a centralized, unitary state, with most power residing at the center. While official rhetoric proclaims that ethnic communities are now characterized by limited autonomous decision-making below the regional state level and a great deal of central control and orchestration. As a consequence, while some institutional forms associated with consolidated democracies, such as political parties and periodic elections with universal suffrage may exist, this is more of a 'pseudo-democracy' (Diamond 1997) than anything else (2002,46).

The institutionalization of a 'new authoritarianism' has been put to a sever test by the May 2005 election, which has led to a major crisis in state-society relations. Consequently, the ruling party is now in a state of soul-searching to make another new turn to hang on to power by any means necessary while the struggle for real autonomy and democratic rule has continued in both the Oromo areas and much of the country.

6. MAJOR PITFALLS IN THE DEMOCRATISATION/ DECENTRALIZATION EXPERIMENT AND THE OROMO PEOPLE'S QUEST FOR SELF-RULE

Theoretically, the fundamentals in any democratization process are: free and fair elections, respect for the rule of law that guarantees civil liberties of citizens, and the building of democratic institutions. Whereas true decentralization involves local autonomy in the decision-making processes in a manner that citizens can influence public policies that affect their daily life. As partly demonstrated above in the discussion of the theoretical part, popular participation and empowerment of the citizenry are crucial aspects in both the democratization and decentralization enterprises. This implies the creation of a legitimate, responsive and accountable government to the electorate at the national and local levels. In the Ethiopian context, it would also mean accommodation of legitimate claims of ethnic groups for local autonomy and self-rule.

At the level of theory, the National Constitution and the various policy initiatives by the present regime do not have much contradiction with the internationally accepted standards. In fact, some of the policies, such as Article 39 of the National Constitution, extravagantly bestow even the 'right to secede to nations, nationalities and peoples' of Ethiopia. However, as the experiments in the Oromo region and elsewhere in the country amply demonstrate, there are several pitfalls at various levels of governance.

Firstly, both the content of the ground rules for the Ethiopian democratisation and the decentralisation initiatives have not been negotiated, either among the organised forces or the respective communities they claim to represent. In the Oromo case, except for the short-lived understanding between the OLF and the TPLF, the policies have been manufactured by the ruling party and imposed on the local population in the interest of the ruling-party. For instance, the Charter of 1991, the Regionalisation Policy of 1992, the National Constitution of 1994 and the various policy initiatives were all authored by the ruling-party that lacks a popular mandate in the eyes of the Oromo people. Put differently, the TPLF leaders in their lust for power and hegemony have transplanted the basic tenets of the political programme of their own organisation to the Charter, and later to the National Constitution and much of the government policies thereof. Here, suffice it to look at the constitutions of the so-called regional states, such as Oromia, which are wholly replicas of the National Constitution, which itself is the extension of the TPLF/EPRDF political programme. (Compare the EPRDF Programme 1991; National Constitution 1994; Constitution of Oromia Regional State 1995).

Secondly, the policy-making process of the regime is based on democratic centralism, a central element in Marxist-Leninist praxis. In what appears to be decentralization on paper and centralization in practice, key policy decisions are made at the centre and transmitted to the locals as directives for implementation. In the Oromo case, the OPDO has been the transmission belt for decisions made at the centre. Many studies done on the Oromo areas for the last twelve years and this author's own observations during several field trips confirm the existence of such a reality. Now, it is an open secret that the authority of the local officials is drawn from the centre, and loyalty to the centre is far more important to them than public service to the local population. In fact, according to the interviews conducted in several Woredas, the OPDO officials are seen by the local population as paid agents in the service of a repressive central government and unresponsive to local demands and needs. They are considered more as enemies to be feared than representatives fighting for the interests and aspirations of the people.

Thirdly, the emerging 'democratic' institutions themselves that are supposed to serve both the institutionalization of democracy and decentralization of power are not outcomes of popular elections. The regional and local councils were not products of popular elections, and neither the National and regional constitutions were approved by genuinely elected representatives of the population. Far worse, the one party-dominated national parliament, whose role is to rubber-stamp the policies cooked by the executive branch, is not a product of free and fair elections. Nor is the judiciary independent; yet its role was supposed to be central in both the maintenance of the checks and balances of modern representative governments and the rule of law. In the Oromo Woredas I visited, the court system is seen as an appendage of the administration that fulfils the wishes of the cadres. Interventions in the decisions of the court and extra-judicial detentions are common occurrences, while there have been known cases of extra-judicial killings (Ethiopian Human Rights Council Report 2000b). The extra-judicial detentions and killings have increased dramatically since the May 2005 elections.

Fourthly, public services are neither seen as the right of the taxpayers nor are they locally initiated. According to interviews made by the author and several empirical studies, public services are hopelessly deteriorating; although there are few visible productive development activities, the local population have got little say in them (Meheret 1998; 2001; Merera 2002). Contrary to the philosophy of decentralization, the rulers always tell the people, '*this is what your democratically elected government thinks is good for you and you should implement them*'. Evidently, the local officials are known by majority of the people for their notoriety as tax collectors than as

representatives working for the provision of public services to them. According to many informants, even the Development Agents, who were supposed to advise people on the use of extension services, are said to be more active in the collection of taxes than in advising the peasants on development programmes. The resultant effect is killing the local initiatives at best, and totally negating the democratization/decentralization drive at worst, which has remained much of a paper value to date.

Fifthly, there is an elaborate system of control imposed from above on each Kebele Association. The administrative structure, the cadre structure, the militia and the elders, who are paid to work as opinion-makers, are all part of the same system of control, coordinated by the administrator. The role of this last government unit is, therefore, to maintain law and order, watch the movements of the opposition groups, and above all, collect taxes. As such, in the eyes of the local population, the system is more of an extension of the higher administrative echelons of the government, and the administrators, the cadres and elders acting as local agents of the state known for its political manipulation.

Sixthly, the most serious pitfall in the scheme of things in the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization enterprise is the unresponsiveness of the state and local authorities to the complaints of the local population. Oromo peasants the author talked to complained about the ever-increasing taxation and accumulating debt of fertilizers as well as many other problems, such as unfair distribution of food aid, harassment by local cadres, rising cost of living, etc. Furthermore, they were bewildered by the general disinclination of government officials to listen to their complaints, and said that they knew no tax break and were always forced to pay taxation by selling their cattle even in times of natural calamities, such as long and recurrent droughts or floods. To add insult to injury, according to many informants, there are also several extra-legal taxation systems for sport, Red Cross, and contribution to the OPDO and its women's committees. These taxes are collected very often alongside land tax and no legal receipt is given for the payments made.

Finally, the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization initiative is claimed to be, above all else, a response of the new regime to solve the country's chronic problem of ethnic inequality and the conflicts thereof. Despite the daily rhetoric about the liberation of the hitherto marginalized ethnic groups and their empowerment, in reality there is little departure from the country's past political trajectory. Coupled with the rising expectations following the creation of an Oromia state, most Oromos are equally resentful of the current state of affairs (See Leenco 1999; Merera 2002). The OPDO, which has been playing, in the eyes of many Oromos,

the role of a devil neither has had an independent existence of its own nor could become a useful intermediary between the government and the governed. Most of its cadres who function as local operatives of the unpopular government are cursed by the very people they claim to represent, and generally tend to be corrupt. They are often dishonoured and condemned through the ruling party's notorious public evaluation instrument (Merera 2002). As a result, according to informants, the average turnover of local officials has been between five and seven a year in the last twelve years, a situation that makes them live under constant fear of dismissal. In this connection, as an interviewee in Ambo area cynically put it, "*the cadres enter the government's bad book and are put under surveillance for subsequent dismissal the moment they start to work for the interest of the local people*". What this reveals is that loyalty to the ruling party is far more important than the service rendered to the people and that the interest of the ruling party has very little to do with the interest of the local Oromo populace.

The most glaring manifestation of the prevailing inequity is the distribution of the national resources among the regions. The available official data for the period 1993/94 - 1999/2000 clearly demonstrates the uneven distribution of national resources (Merera 2002, 176 - 180). For instance, the Oromo and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' regions, which above all else are known for their production of coffee that constitutes more than 60% to the country's foreign exchange earnings, are allotted a clearly disproportionate share from the national treasury. According to the data of the period, the Tigray region's per capita share of the federal subsidy was consistently higher than the Oromia, Amhara and SNNP regions which, together, constitute more than 80% of the country's population. The same is true for capital expenditure per capita as well as foreign loan and aid per capita. Furthermore, the Somali region, whose population is greater than Tigray, was getting proportionally far less than Tigray until 1998 when it joined the favoured regions club, which makes the percentage of the disfavoured population more than 86% of the country's total population prior to 1998. In fact, the capital expenditure per capita for Tigray is about three times greater than that of Oromia. A more glaring discrepancy that can be inferred from the data of the period is the Oromia region, which is known for being the storehouse of Ethiopia's wealth, disproportionately receives the least from the national treasury (Merera 2002, 176-79).

To sum up, as demonstrated in the practice of the Oromia region, the top-down approach of the Ethiopian democratization and decentralization initiative appear not to be working. The hegemonic aspiration of the sponsors of the process has obstructed every genuine movement forward. What the sponsors want is to institutionalize the hegemonic control of the

ruling party under the guise of democracy and decentralization, while what genuine democratization and decentralization require is real sharing of power between the centre and the local authorities and empowerment of the ordinary citizenry. The meaningful sharing of power and empowerment of citizens can only be done under popularly elected accountable governments at the central, regional and local levels. Any smart political manipulation by the powers that be cannot replace real institutionalization of democratic governance and genuine decentralization. Consequently, the popular struggles for real autonomy, self-rule and democracy have continued across Oromia by the independent Oromo movements like the OLF and the Oromo National Congress.[8]

7.   CONCLUDING REMARKS

As noted in the theoretical discussion earlier, the two key issues in democratization and decentralisation enterprises are the equitable distribution of power and resources, while negotiating competing claims and interests. In the Ethiopian context, the question of the equitable distribution of both power and resources, especially those under the command of the state, has been central in the struggles for democracy and social justice in much of the second-half of the twentieth century. Put differently, the hallmark of competing ethnic nationalisms in the country has been the struggle for power and resources under the control of the state-where land used to be a central element during the days of the imperial regime.

The Oromos have been fighting since the 1960s under the banner of national and class struggles to end their inequality in the share of both power and land, which condemned the bulk of the Oromo population to wallow under classical serfdom. Although the land question was addressed by the military regime in many major ways, the problems still exist because of the dilemma of successive regimes to fully resolve the Oromo question in a manner acceptable to the majority of the Oromo population. The key issue that underpins the protest and struggles of the Oromos and that has been at stake is the share of power with the country's largest ethnic group, an agenda that cannot be fulfilled with some token handouts in terms of rights by a minority-controlled government. At the same time, it is important to note that, the Imperial regime had tried to solve the Oromo dilemma through a policy of "nation-building" and the cultural assimilation thereof, where the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity were made to play a critical role in the process. The military regime did take some substantive measures in the right direction, especially through the land nationalization decree, but its regional autonomy project under 'barrack socialism' could not meet the rising expectations on the part of the Oromos regarding the

sharing of power. Likewise, the cosmetic changes introduced by the present regime under the guise of democracy and decentralization of power have failed to meet the Oromo people's quest for real self-rule and democracy. As a result of the top-down approach and the authoritarian actions of the incumbent regime, the hoped - for democratization/decentralization drive is foundering.

The most serious pitfall in the decentralisation/decentralisation initiative is that the power holders from minorities are trying to solve the problem of the majority's share of power at their terms as well as in their interest, not at the terms and in interest of the majority. What should be underlined in this regard is that, as can be seen from the lessons in the past and the present political impasse, marginalizing a majority and hoping to democratise/decentralize at the same time is a contradiction. Furthermore, anybody who knows Ethiopia well cannot fail to reach the inescapable conclusion that both the fate of democracy and the fate of the country as a united polity largely hinge upon the manner in which the Oromo question is solved.

In conclusion, what should be emphasized in light of the preceding discussion is the urgent need for rethinking by the contending forces. First, it is high time that the country's divided opposition started to reconsider their alternative policies and actions. Accepting the principle of unity in diversity, which would enable it to devise a common agenda for the democratization of the Ethiopian state, needs to be pursued more honestly and aggressively. This would help the opposition overcome its chronic problem of fragmentation and undermine the divide-and-rule policy of the ruling party. Furthermore, if the country is to be pulled out of the present political quagmire, the ruling party, on its part, should have the political will to reassess its contradictory approaches of propagating democratic principles on paper and adhering to authoritarian actions in practice. No less importantly, it is time that the ruling party understood and took seriously the linkages between stability, democratic governance and meaningful economic development, and worked towards their realization.

NOTES

1. Ethiopia took its present shape with existing boundaries in the last quarter of the 19th century in the process of the expansion of the Ethiopian State.

2. Most of the current political problems of Ethiopia are rooted in the process of the creation of the modern empire-state in the last quarter of the 19th century. For instance, highland Eritrea was detached from Tigray and became an Italian colony from 1890 to 1896 when Menelik abandoned it to the Italians. The

Tigrayan elite began to feel dominated when they were reduced to second-class status following the death of Yohannes in 1889 while a larger part of the Oromo and the rest of the Southern Peoples population were brought under the Ethiopian state during this period on unequal terms. Hence, the current political crisis in the country is linked to these events of the 19th century in one way or another.

3. The introduction of firearms into Shewa in abundance decisively shifted the balance of force in favour of the conquering army of Menelik. In fact, the resistance of most of the indigenous peoples of the South became futile mainly because of the superior firearms employed by Menelik's invading army.

4. Most of the old southern Ethiopian towns were products of the garrison settlements created for political as well as military control of the various parts of the South. They soon developed into both as administrative and commercial centres of the respective areas.

5. Many observers of Ethiopian politics make the distinction between the North and the South Ethiopia in many major respects: the political institutions, the land-ownership system and other instruments of oppression. See, for instance, Markakis (1974) and Addis Hiwot (1975) about the extent of dual oppression to which the people of the South had been exposed - markedly different from that the North.

6. This conference was the first event in which Oromo organisations negotiated and participated in formation of the Ethiopian government in the name of Oromos. For the OLF version of the story, see Leenco Lata (1998; 1999).

7. According to many observers of Ethiopian politics, the OPDO was created out of the ex-prisoners of war in the hands of both TPLF and EPLF (see Young 1997, 166; Pausewang *et al* 2002, 14; Leenco 1999).

8. The Oromo National Congress (ONC) was created in 1996 as a response to the crisis of Oromo nationalism under the leadership of the OLF on the one hand and the TPLF-created OPDO on the other. It emerged as a third line in the Oromo movement by rejecting both secession from and submission to the Tigrayan elite-dominated regime as real alternatives.

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