

Nation Formation and Legitimacy: The Case of Ethiopia

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Abstract: This paper attempted to examine how nation formation of Ethiopia undergone and legitimate under the Empire, Military and EPRDF regimes. Accordingly, the paper argues that there are changes and continuities in nation formation of Ethiopian under Empire, military and EPRDF regimes. The study used secondary source of data; collected from books, journal articles, published and unpublished materials, governmental and non-governmental organization reports and remarks, magazines and web sources. To substantiate and supplement the secondary data, the paper also used primary data collected through few key informant interviews. Given the data gathered are qualitative, the study employed qualitative data analysis techniques. The finding of the study revealed that the legitimacy of every regime has their own explanation during monarchy it was that most of the population believed in Jesus Christ so that belief was that king came from God and accept that is divine rule and also the church was doing that. When we come to the recent even if the Derg regime has done land reform but has some defects one not seriously (radically) implemented throughout the country and farmers were not able to use their product. But special after 1991 it was radical land reform and other like democracy, multi-party system and decentralization also contributed for the government to be legitimate.

Keywords: Ethiopia, nation formation, legitimacy, Empire Regime, Military Regime, EPRDF Regime,

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa and one of the oldest in the world. What are believed to be the oldest remains of a human ancestor ever found, which have been dated as being some five million years old, were discovered in the Awash Valley in Ethiopia. This beats the discovery of “Lucy”, a 3.2 million year old skeleton, who was unearthed in the same area in 1974. The Greek historian Herodotus, of the fifth century BC, describes ancient Ethiopia in his writings, while the Bible’s Old Testament records the Queen of Sheba’s visit to Jerusalem where “she proved Solomon with hard questions”. Matters clearly went further than that because legend asserts that King Menelik – the founder of the Ethiopian Empire – was the son of the Queen and Solomon (<https://africa-facts.org/facts-about-ethiopia/>)¹

Ethiopia is a Horn of Africa nation located in the heart of East Africa. It shares its borders with six other countries - Eritrea to the north, Djibouti to the northeast, Somalia to the east, Kenya to the south, South Sudan to the west and Sudan to the northwest. Ethiopia is slightly less than twice the size of Texas, with a total area of 426,372 square miles/ 1,104,300 square kilometers². According to the CIA World Factbook², Ethiopia's population was estimated at 102,374,044 in July 2016. The largest ethnic group in the country is the Oromo people, who account for 34.4% of the population.

The official national language of Ethiopia is Amharic, although it is the most widely spoken. The Oromo belongs to the Oromo language, which is the official working language of the state of Oromia. Other states use different official working languages, including Somali, Tigrigna and Afar.

The predominant religion in Ethiopia is Ethiopian

Orthodox, which accounts for approximately 43% of the population. Islam is also widely practiced, accounting for around 33% of the population; while the remaining percent is largely made up by other Christian denominations (CSA, 2007)³.

However, there are always changes and continuities of nation formation /building/under different regimes to be legitimate. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine how the nation formation of Ethiopian in the consecutive regime undergone and legitimate. In terms of methodology, the study employed the qualitative research methodology and narrative research design was employed to achieve the objective of the study. Accordingly, the study used a secondary source of data; collected from books, journal articles, published and unpublished materials and archives. To substantiate the secondary data, primary data was also collected via few key informant interviews from key actors and pertinent experts. Given the data gathered are qualitative; the study also employed the qualitative technique of data analysis.

2. NATION FORMATION BEFORE 1991

In the process of Ethiopian Nation formation, the central power – from emperor Tewodros to the present government run by the Ethiopian People Revolutionary and Democratic Front (EPRDF) led by Dr. Abiy Ahmed (peace noble winner of 2019) - shows a certain degree of continuity in the attempt of controlling a vast and instable territory by the means of: (i) a structure of administrative and bureaucratic control, through which the power of the central government is maintained and enforced over the people within its jurisdiction; (ii) a system of extraction and distribution, through which resources are extracted from the economy and distributed according to the priority of the government – “mostly of course for the maintenance

¹ <https://africa-facts.org/facts-about-ethiopia/>

² CIA World Factbook

³ Central Statistical Agency, 2007

of the state itself⁴(iii) a strategy of extraversion of external resources to utilize technical, financial, military international assistance to legitimate and reinforce the central government; (iv) an ideological apparatus to legitimize these practices and encourage adhesion and support by the population.

2.1. A strong center for administrative and bureaucratic control

The distinctive variant of central power consolidation in Ethiopia arose from the need to control and tight together a vast territory, densely populated by different ethnic groups and to defend it from external menace and centripetal movements. In fact, rather than on revenues from external trade as the majority of the other African countries, this power was based on surplus accumulation through direct exaction from a population living of agriculture.

This enterprise of accumulation built on and consolidated the dual process of centralization and territorial expansion— almost reaching the border that we find today - undertaken by emperor Menelik at the end of the XIX century, culminated in the creation of a new capital, Addis Ababa (1886), in a more strategic position than previous political centers (Axum, Gonder) to control the new empire originated by the acquisition of the southern provinces.

While the most accurate description of Menelik period should be in term of “decentralized monarchy, rather than a centralized one”⁵, things changed significantly under emperor Haile Selassie, with the central government tightening its control over the state territory by the means of a “modernization” process to build a centralized and modern system of administration and bureaucracy and of the creation of a unified national army. In particular, Haile Selassie’s first written constitution (1931) provided the legal and institutional framework for the achievement of his “modernizing” objective: introduction of a national taxation system, prohibition of local taxation by regional lords, establishment of a paid civil service, the creation of a national army and the prohibition of any local feudal army.

The military junta or provisional administrative council, known locally as– the *Derg* - led by Menghistu Haile Mariam that seized power in 1977, “continued and perhaps completed the process of over-centralization introduced by the modernizing emperors of the nineteenth century”⁶,

transforming and developing the Organization inherited from Haile Selassie in a more explicit structured Leninist political system.

The *Derg* strengthened the existing means of control and introduced new ones: the army, the ministry of public and national security, the party and several mass organizations, like trade unions, the women’s and youth associations “through which virtually all Ethiopians were brought within a common administrative framework”⁷. Control was further ensured by the establishment throughout the country of organs of local administration, the county and peasant’s associations. These institutions “add up to a control capacity vastly greater than anything that could have been provided by the personal networks of the old regime” and “unrivalled in Sub-Saharan Africa”⁸.

2.2. Mechanisms for surplus extraction

In Ethiopia, the process of political centralization and economic accumulation followed a trajectory unique in the African continent, based on a peculiar agrarian system that led to the emergence of social classes. Thus, the modern Abyssinian empire-state, inaugurated by Tewodros II (1855-68) and consolidated by Menelik (1889-1913) and Haile Selassie (1930- 1974) has been often compared with European feudalism and “differentiated from others in the continent by its greater organic linkage to society”⁹.

In imperial Ethiopia, different land tenure systems and mode of production were adopted. In the historical “Abyssinian” northern core of the Empire, the system was based on “over lordship”. This society was characterized by little differentiation between elite and commoner cultures, due to the ideology of kinship between classes and the possibility of upward – but downward as well – social mobility. Fief lords enjoy rights granted by the emperor, the administrator of the land (*gult*), not on the land, but only on the peasants living and working on it, while peasant retaining the ownership of the land according to the owner of the land (*rist*) tenure. As a consequence, Abyssinian system did not generate a category of landless people who had then to work for others as servants or wage laborers. Moreover, the lack of direct productive control over the land, limited the Abyssinian lords’ economic interests in improving agricultural techniques, as occurred in Europe.

In the southern provinces, conquered lately, a system of “land lordship” - closer to European feudal standards – was created. Landlords, coming from the Abyssinian core of the Empire, were bestowed with title over lands and

⁴ C. Clapham, *Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 101.

⁵ B. Zewde, “Introduction”, in B. Zewde and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia. The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet Uppsala and Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa, 2002, p. 10.

⁶ G. Calchi Novati, *Conflict and the Reshaping of State in the Horn of Africa*, in Triulzi A., M. Cristina Ercolessi (eds.), *State, Power, and New Political*

Actors in Postcolonial Africa, Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 2004/2004, p. 97.

⁷ Clapham (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁸ Clapham, *Conclusion: revolution, nationality and the Ethiopian state*, in Marina Ottaway (ed.), *The political economy of Ethiopia*, Library of Congress, 1990, p. 226.

⁹ Gebru, T. 1991, *Ethiopia, power and protest: peasant revolts in the twentieth century*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 26

sent to administrate and tax the southern agriculture production, determining a system interpreted by historians and anthropologists in term of center-periphery dynamic¹⁰. “The notion of extraction in particular was evident in the phrase commonly used to describe the appointment of lords to fiefs: they were sent to eat their respective countries”.

In addition to agricultural products, taxation included also monetary and labor obligations. In order to minimize its costs, the State shifted its social functions to the rural population,

The revolution led by the *Derg*, in common with socialist revolutions elsewhere, involved a sharp increase in the level of public employment, and “a consequent need for an improved extractive capacity in order to maintain the enlarged state apparatus”¹¹.

In order to achieve this goal, the central element of *Derg* strategy was the land reform: nationalization and use rights allocated through newly created peasant associations.

This led to an increased capacity to extract resources from the economy, in particular through a land-use tax and an agricultural income tax that replaced the old system of taxation. Furthermore, “a hidden level of taxation on the peasantry was imposed through the pricing mechanisms for cash crops”.

2.3. Strategies of extraversion

Menelik first and Haile Salassie later, benefited from the norm of sovereignty and the participation in the global economy and political system on terms very different from those available to other African rulers. The Ethiopian Empire “not only survived European colonial occupation but increased its size by more than 65 percent in the wake of the scramble for Africa (...) taking full advantage of European capital and weaponry. It was European capital and technology that laid down the communication and transportation infrastructure, thereby transforming the means of coercion, and enabling Ethiopian rulers to centralize, unify and consolidate the state, a pattern unevenly duplicated in the rest of Africa”¹².

In particular, the internationally recognized statehood gave the opportunity to gain access to imported arms and technological improvements, such as the construction of the Addis-Djibouti Railway by French investors between 1897 and 1917 that allowed full incorporation of the country in the world economy.

After the end of World War II, Ethiopia was also one of the earliest developing countries to receive aid in the modern sense, starting in the late 1940s.

In particular the support from the USA, based on military, diplomatic and economic linkages, was critical for the existence itself of the regime of Haile Selassie. Under his rule, Ethiopia became the main recipient of American

¹⁰ Cfr. D. Donham and W. James, *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, James Currey, 1986

¹¹ Clapham (1988), *op. cit.*, p. 123

¹² Gebru, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

military aid in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Military support was matched with development assistance, particularly in the secondary education sector, that in the 60s was highly dependent from the presence of Peace Corps assistance¹³.

Clearly, the *Derg* reversed this framework of international alliances, by aligning the country in the Soviet camp. However, the process of extraversion continued: the soviet alliance represented one manifestation of the close relationship between access to external resources and the control of local space. The support of Soviet weapons was decisive in preserving Ethiopian independence at the time of Somali invasion in 1977-78.

Despite western aid was reduced during the *Derg* regime, the soviet alignment did not prevent a massive flow of food aid during the Great Famine in 1984-85. In all these cases, “external resources have been subordinated to domestic political control, induced to maintain a revolutionary process and the (domestic) political organization”¹⁴.

2.4. Apparatus of legitimization

The control over the population by the center was not exercised only recurring to coercion and violent means but also mobilizing a strong ideological apparatus. While the limitation of caricaturing the diversity and vitality of Ethiopian socio-political culture, it is important to acknowledge that this ideology contributed to the formation of “a political culture that emphasizes a strict hierarchical understanding of society, where each member’s socio-political position and status is clearly defined and understood”¹⁵. Scholars like Abbink argue that “this historical heritage of authoritarianism and an ideology of power as a commodity possessed by new elite at the center” still provides the context for the formation of the dominant trends in the political culture of contemporary Ethiopia¹⁶.

Moral and cultural foundations of Imperial Ethiopia laid on the Orthodox Church’s system of values and beliefs. “The operative ideological justification for the rulers derived from the divine right of the Solomonic dynasty” and Church’s code of morality with the belief in divine omnipotence, the sanctity of royal authority and the justness of overlordship”¹⁷.

The Church’s intellectual and moral leadership helped in the creation of a social system that allowed exploitation of producers by the political hierarchy and maintained the

¹³ Cfr. Clapham, 1998, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Clapham, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

¹⁵ S. Vaughan and K. Tronvoll, 2003, p.89

¹⁶ J. Abbink, *Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath*, in “African Affairs”, 105/419, p. 173-199, 2006, p. 193.

¹⁷ Gebru, *op. cit.*, p. 15

social order, by providing a code of ethics that stressed habits of conformity, deference to authority, and reverence for tradition.

This system of beliefs was disseminated among the population through the education system, controlled by the Orthodox Church, and the religious practices themselves. In fact, local churches were not simply places of worship, but also important centers of political interaction, where normative values were acquired and social constraints imposed through an intensive calendar of festivities and celebrations.

Once the revolution succeeded, the Derg had to solve a problem of legitimacy, “since the Solomonic legend (reaffirmed in 1955 constitution, art. 2)¹⁸. The new leadership found a suitable (and fashionable) substitute in the Marxism-Leninism they imported from Moscow, that performed functions similar to the earlier, externally procured, imperial legitimacy. In fact, in describing the perception of peasants of the Derg, Aspen, affirms that “Marxist ideology and organization contributed to making the State into a factor that was matched only by Nature and God in unpredictability and power, although such a perception was not new to the Ethiopian peasants after centuries of “Divine Rule” by dictatorial Emperors¹⁹.

At the beginning, Marxist doctrine was spread around the country by the Development through Cooperation Campaign of 1975, popularly known as the *zemecha (movement)*: students from urban areas were sent to the countryside to indoctrinate and mobilize rural masses, explain land reform and encourage literacy. In the following years, the message was reinforced through the pattern of other campaigns, such as literacy and “villagisation”, and the *encadrement* of rural populations in mass organizations and peasants’ associations. And after overthrow the monarch Derg was first done that all lands that was from the hand of monarchs were transfer or allocated to the peasants to use it but under the government property.

3. NATION FORMATION AFTER 1991

Similar patterns of central power consolidation have been followed by the coalition forming the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) that defeated the Derg in 1991, after twenty-five years of civil war in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

¹⁸ Bereket Habte Selassie, *Empire and Constitutional Engineering: the PDRE in historical perspective*, in Ottaway, *op. cit.*, p.121).

¹⁹ Aspen H, “Models of Democracy - Perceptions of Power. Government and Peasantry in Ethiopia”, in B. Zewde and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia. The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet Uppsala and Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa, 2002, p. 63.

Elements of continuity with the previous system are identifiable even during this civil conflict: EPRDF often recurrent to the same strategies of the Derg: “forceful mobilization of a rural constituency and a rather sectarian ideology”²⁰ extraversion of external resources and in particular international assistance in response to the famine of 1984-84, so that they may be considered two moments of the same revolution reacting to the structural incoherencies of Hailse Selassie regime²¹.

3.1. A strong center in a Federal Republic

In principle, the Constitution elaborated by EPRDF and its allies in 1995, designed a radical devolved federation, composed by nine Regional States (Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, Oromia, Somali, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples’ Region, Tigray) and two city administrations for the main cities, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa.

Regional States have been endowed with a considerable degree of self-rule, and almost a “semi-sovereign” status because they have a constitution, a flag and a regional language to be use in school, courts and public administration. Furthermore a unique aspect of the federal Constitution of Ethiopia is its recognition of nations, nationalities and peoples’ right to self-determination, including the right to secession, as stated in article 39²².

However, not even the new constitutional design has changed the very essence of state nature: “the Ethiopian state, despite reforms towards ethnic federalism, has remained centralist- authoritarian in a manner reminiscent of previous regimes”.

Ayenew utilizes the expression “authoritarian ethnic federalism” to depict the tight control exercised by central authorities over the lower orders of governance. In fact; several elements counteract this degree of devolution in practice²³:

3.2. Legitimacy through the “fight against poverty”

The strategies of mass mobilization adopted by EPRDF are similar to those of imperial and revolutionary Ethiopia. Nevertheless, despite being the political beneficiary of Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movement (in particular of the Tigray People Liberation Front – TPLF), it could not openly recur, due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, to its ideological background to reshape the Ethiopian polity after the civil war. Rather, to

²⁰ J. Abbink, *op. cit.*, p. 179

²¹ Cfr. Clapham, *Controlling space in Ethiopia*, *op. cit.*
²² A. Fiseha, *Theory versus Practice in the Implementation of Ethiopia’s Ethnic Federalism*

²³ Cfr. Ayenew M., “Decentralization in Ethiopia”, in B. Zewde and S. Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia. The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet Uppsala and Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa, 2002

gain international legitimacy, EPRDF was obliged to embrace the new orthodoxy of the international development thinking, namely democracy as necessary premise to development and poverty reduction. EPRDF also made remarkable land reform for farmers to motivate production under the ownership of the government with a policy of rural and agricultural transformation.

Coherently, the ideological apparatus of the fight against poverty was found as a powerful tool to legitimize the new central power and promote its agenda also in the domestic arena. Not surprisingly, this system of legitimization is based on mechanisms similar to those utilized by the previous Ethiopian regimes.

3.3. Decentralization in Ethiopia

For much of the 20th century Ethiopia was ruled by highly centralized and undemocratic governments. Traditions of autocratic and hierarchical rule are long and deep rooted. Since the present government took power in 1991 it has taken significant steps to introduce elements of democratic accountability. It has also embarked on a process of decentralization that seeks to recognize the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of the people living within Ethiopia's borders and embodied this in its Constitution (World Bank, 2009). In the last quarter century, many countries have engaged in the process of decentralization by transferring responsibilities of the state to lower tiers of government. Such transfer of power is believed to bring not only political stability and contribute to democratic governance, but also improve service delivery and attain equity. The 1991 government change in Ethiopia has ushered in a decentralized system of governance. This is a departure from the past political system which did not allow for self-rule and institutional development and harmony between the different ethnic groups. The 1994 Constitutional response involved the elaboration of a new institutional framework built around the formal devolution of hitherto highly centralized authority. The Government initiated successive rounds of deepening decentralization, devolving powers and mandates to Regional states, and then to Woredas or district authorities which is an outcome of the adoption of a federal system of government in Ethiopia. With the devolution of power to the regional governments, implementation of economic policies and development programs is shifting, to a large extent, from the center to the regions (MOFED, 2002).

3.4. Democratization process

For just over a decade the EPRDF government in Ethiopia has been attempting to implement a novel form of governance ethnic federalism. The government has been evolved in the process of administrative devolution. Power and authority in regional administrative matter had been devolved to regional state level. At the political level, Ethiopia does possess democratic forms and institution. The multi-party election is periodically held. Also, there is evidence that gradually people at the district level and below is becoming more involved in making political and

administrative decision that affect their daily lives²⁴. As one of important changes from the previous regime the FDRE Constitution provides for a federal government and nine regional states conferred with different sets of responsibilities relating to important political, economic and social matters. The government is also formed based on the parliamentary system whereby the political party or parties with the greatest number of seats form and lead the executive. The Parliament appoints the Prime Minister from the dominant party or from ruling party, and the Prime Minister in turn appoints the ministers and vice-ministers²⁵.

The parliament is also composed of two different assemblies, namely the house of peoples' representatives and the house of Federation. Each differs from the other in their respective powers and functions except in those constitutionally-specified matters falling under their concurrent competence. For instance, both houses are required in a joint session to take appropriate measures when state authorities are unable to arrest violations of human rights within their jurisdiction. The constitution also equally recognizes the equality of each of the Ethiopian Nation, Nationality, People, language, religion etc. without any sort of partiality. Hence, it closed all possible doors of mistrust, conflict and disagreement over the identity question.

The fundamental question of all the Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities and Peoples has been shifted from identity to development, peace, democratization, good governance. The constitutional right of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia to self-determination including the right to secession ensures that Ethiopia is their common country in which they live together under mutual understanding and cooperation. It further guaranteed them that any sort of violation of their constitutional rights would be automatically unacceptable and void. That is, Ethiopia has become equal home of all the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples in which they live under mutual cooperation to fulfill their common interest and collectively fight against their common enemy, poverty, thereby to ensure their renaissance through their joint efforts²⁶.

3.5. Ethiopian multi-party politics

After the coming to power of the EPRDF in 1991 a number of ethnic-based political parties mushroomed in Ethiopia. The EPRDF, as an ethnic-based party coalition, encouraged the formation of political parties along ethnic lines and tacitly discouraged non-ethnic parties or other

²⁴ Edmond J (2003). Ethnic Federalism and Democratization in Ethiopia, pp30-43.

²⁵ Stéphane O (2004). Measuring and Monitoring Progress towards Good Governance in Africa, Governance Profile of Ethiopia. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

²⁶ *Ethiopian Herald* (2015). *FDRE Constitution: Paving Ethiopia's Future*. Available at: www.ethpress.gov.et/herald/index

pan Ethiopian parties²⁷. Thus, the year 1991 was the turning point in multi-party politics of Ethiopia. After many years of centralized and one party rule, the country has started to follow multi-party system by attempting to modernize Ethiopian multi ethnic society within the ethnic based government system and multi-party democracy²⁸.

So due to the introduction of multi- party politics after 1991 the ruling party opened the political space in the country allowing opposition parties to freely campaign and competes for political power. Thus, one of the most important developments in the post-1991 Ethiopian politics is the emergence of legally recognized political parties (Stéphane, 2004)²⁹.

This marked the emergence of new political parties to the scene by granting legal personality to operate in the country.

4. CONCLUSIONS

For centuries, Ethiopia was governed by a highly centralized monarch. Ethiopia is a nation with a long, venerable and complex history and never colonized. The last monarch was Emperor Haile Selassie who accessed to the throne in 1931. After a popular uprising in 1974 which left a political vacuum, a provisional administrative council, known locally as the Derg, was set up and ruled for about seventeen years but collapsed in May 1991 in a great and blood shad revolution. The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took over the capital, Addis Ababa.

The EPRDF assumed governance responsibilities and convened a National Peace Conference in Addis Ababa which adopted a Transitional Charter and formed a transitional government. This paved the way for the installation of an elected government under a pluralist political system which in turn leads the country to practice of good governance and democracy. Thus, the coming of EPDRF government is a landmark for the introduction of democracy and good governance in the country though; the problem of good governance is still prevalent in the country. So that still now governance performance and democratic system cannot reach a reliable stage of development in the country.

Generally the legitimacy of every regime has their own explanation during monarchy it was that most of the population believed in Jesus Christ so that belief was that king came from God and accept that is divine rule and also

the church was doing that. When we come to the recent even if the Derg regime has done land reform but has some defects one not seriously (radically) implemented throughout the country and farmers were not able to use their product. But special after 1991 it was radical land reform and other like democracy, multi-party system and decentralization also contributed for the government to be legitimate.

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²⁷ Wondwosen T (2009). *Ethiopian Opposition Political Parties and Rebel Fronts: Past and Present*, *International Journal of Human and Social Sciences* 4(1).

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