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Ethnic Nationalism and the Challenge of Achieving Sustainable Peace in Ethiopia

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WORKU ABERRA, MAY 22 2023

Despite recent efforts by the Ethiopian government to promote peace by signing an agreement with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and, with US participation, initiating peace talks with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), the prospects for sustainable peace in Ethiopia remain uncertain. One of the significant obstacles to achieving lasting peace is the primacy of ethnic politics in the country, further entrenched by the government's practices, rhetoric, and policies.

Ethnic federalism, the political system that the Abiy government inherited from the previous TPLF-dominated government, has institutionalized political uncertainty, conflict, and instability. While the system has allowed for the promotion of cultures and the self-governance of ethnic groups, it is still highly flawed. The system, with its ethnic-based party and administrative structures, was designed to enable a minority party—the TPLF—to stay in power by dividing the population along ethnic lines. This has resulted in the politicization of ethnicity and the ethnicization of politics, fueling competition for resources, inner conflict, and political turmoil.

Ethnic federalism has contributed considerably to armed border conflicts between the regional states. The Ethiopian constitution, the legal foundation of ethnic federalism, grants sovereignty to the ethnic majorities of each region, severely restricting minority rights and providing the legal basis for ethnic cleansing. Article 39 of the constitution, which allows districts to become regional states and regional states to secede from Ethiopia simply with a majority in a referendum, has eroded elite cohesiveness across ethnic groups and has created conditions for political precarity.

The need for changing the system is evident, but the current government has taken no tangible steps towards amending the constitution or reforming the administrative structure of the country, as the system serves the political interests of the ruling elite in both the short and long run. Some critics argue the ruling elite's long-term goal is to establish a new Ethiopia—Greater Oromia—dominated by Oromos through regional economic integration. Achieving this objective requires promoting a vision of Oromo nationalism, and within the boundaries of ethnic federalism, that resonates with both moderate and extremist Oromos. The promotion of Oromo nationalism has been fueled by highlighting past injustices and humiliations suffered by the Oromo people, real and perceived. This has sometimes been accompanied by incendiary rhetoric by government officials about the defeat of the Amharas and the establishment of an Ethiopian state under Oromo control.

The political and economic dominance of the Oromo elite in Ethiopia's polity is apparent. Many Oromo politicians have publicly acknowledged Oromo dominance in the current government, and key state security apparatuses are headed by Oromos. The economic elite, once dominated by TPLF supporters, has now been replaced by supporters of the ruling Prosperity Party, primarily from the Oromo community. The transition has exacerbated crony capitalism, corruption, and rent-seeking, worsening Ethiopia's international ranking on corruption. The government's attempts to impose Oromo dominance on the rest of Ethiopia's population have faced significant challenges from various ethnic groups, particularly from the Amhara community, the second-largest ethnic group in the country. The Amhara elite has been vocal in its opposition to the government's measures and has been effective in its resistance. In response, the government has implemented retaliatory measures against the Amhara community, including restricting travel to Addis Ababa, demolishing homes, freezing bank accounts, and imprisoning journalists, activists, and professors.

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Moreover, the government has formed an unlikely tacit alliance with the TPLF, the rebel groups against which it fought a two-year war. The TPLF, while militarily weakened, still poses a significant threat to the Amhara region; it aims to regain control of territories historically claimed by the Amhara people. These territories were annexed into Tigray by the TPLF during its rule from 1991 to 2018, where tens of thousands of Tigrayans were settled, leading to the displacement of 50,000 Amharas from their ancestral homes. The Amhara forces recaptured these areas during the conflict with the TPLF and have been self-administering them for the past two years. The TPLF has been demanding the return of annexed land to Tigray, which is fiercely opposed by the Amhara community residing in those territories. They fear that returning the territories to TPLF rule could result in subjugation and cultural genocide. The central government appears inclined to appease the TPLF's demands, even though it risks encouraging the TPLF to declare an independent Tigray, especially if the strategically important border region with Sudan is handed back to TPLF rule. This situation could potentially result in a renewed armed conflict.

The government has made significant military decisions to facilitate the realization of its dual long-term goals of Oromo dominance and the creation of a Greater Oromia. First, it has neutralized the threat posed by the TPLF to its power. Second, it has recently started to dismantle and integrate regional security forces into the federal police force or the national army, despite facing significant opposition, especially from the Amhara community.

While many recognize the negative potential of the presence of regional security forces in the long run, they oppose the government's impetuous decision for three main reasons. First, the lack of public consultation and the exclusion of regional state parliaments from discussions have raised concerns about transparency and accountability. Second, regional security forces have played a crucial role in maintaining law and order in their respective regions, while the effectiveness of the federal police force or national army in maintaining peace and security in the face of serious threats has been unimpressive. Third, the selective implementation of the policy has raised concerns about the government's motives, as it has so far targeted only the Amhara region, while leaving the TPLF, OLA, and other regional states untouched.

The Amhara community vehemently opposes the government's decision to disband its regional security forces due to its concerns about the central government's ability to protect it. The repeated attacks on Amhara civilians by armed groups have left the Amharas feeling vulnerable and distrustful of the government's ability to provide adequate security.

The government's controversial decision has created a potentially dangerous situation. Prime Minister Abiy's resolute statement, "The decision to dismantle these forces will be implemented at any cost," reveals the government's firm stance. The Amhara armed forces have also shown a strong determination not to disarm. Many have refused to surrender their weapons and instead have chosen to abandon their camps and integrate with the population. The likelihood of violent confrontation and bloodshed is high, but the government's capacity to disarm the armed forces is questionable.

The government's recent actions have caused widespread anger, resentment, and disillusionment among the Amhara community, who were previously strong supporters of the Prime Minister. The Amhara community perceives that it has been let down and mistreated. The dismantling of the Amhara security forces by the government has contributed to the surge of Amhara nationalism, creating a potential risk of ethnic conflict on the horizon.

The Ethiopian government's pursuit of ethnic dominance and maintaining ethnic federalism poses a serious threat to Ethiopia's long-term peace and stability. This threat is further compounded by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's alarming statement during a parliamentary question period on March 28, 2023. When asked about the potential consequences of his policies for the country, the Prime Minister remarked, "If we want to destroy Ethiopia, no one can stop us." His statement raises serious concerns about the Prime Minister's commitment to the cause of peace, particularly given his status as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. It is crucial for the government to acknowledge the gravity of the situation and find solutions that address the concerns of all ethnic groups in the country. Only then can Ethiopia achieve lasting peace and stability.

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