

Extremism and the Struggle for Unity and Democracy

By

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Extremist ethnic nationalism has harmed the struggle for peace, justice, equality, and democracy in Ethiopia. The reason is that extremism fosters conflict, undermines unity, and engenders authoritarianism.

For the purposes of this commentary we can distinguish between two types of ethnic nationalisms that we find in Ethiopia today: extremist and moderate. Extremist ethnic nationalism can be defined as the exclusively ethnic perception, interpretation, and formulation of Ethiopia's problems and their resolutions. Moderate nationalism, by contrast, recognizes that the fundamental problems of poverty, illiteracy, and disease are universal problems that all Ethiopians face and searches for a common solution. Moderate nationalism is collaborative; extremist nationalism, adversarial. Moderates want respect for their culture, language, and history, within a united Ethiopia. Extremists insist independence is the only way to achieve respect. Moderates emphasize the similarities between the various cultures; extremists exaggerate the differences. Moderates pursue equality; extremists covet domination.

Moderates are willing to forgive past injustices. Extremists bear a grudge against an entire ethnic group and use past wrongs as weapons to serve a separatist goal. Moderate nationalism rejoices over Ethiopia's shared culture, history, and destiny; extremism denigrates them. Moderates realize that a nation is not built by dwelling on the darkest past of its history, but rather by focussing on the brightest aspects of its future. Extremists are determined to destroy Ethiopia.

If politics is war by other means as Clausewitz once said, then extremist ethnic politics is ethnic war by other means. How so? The ultimate goal of any political party, ethnic or non-ethnic, is to come to power through democratic elections or undemocratic schemes. Either way, the path to power is paved with all kinds of clashes, the clash of ideas, personalities, and interests. When political parties are organized on the basis of ethnicity, as opposed to ideology, the clashes take on ethnic dimensions. Whenever ethnic politics is used as a means of achieving power or as a device for promoting separation, it incites ethnic conflict.

Extremist ethnic nationalism is intrinsically anti-democratic. In Ethiopia, the current political system was crafted by three extremist groups in 1991, the EPLF, TPLF, and OLF. The motivation behind establishing ethnic federalism and promoting ethnic-based political parties was precisely to create favourable conditions—political conflict, servitude, fragmentation—for authoritarianism to thrive. The political system was cleverly designed to preclude democratic governance. Even the ethnic parties created by ethnic federalism, moderate or extremist, cannot run for an office, regionally or federally, outside their ethnic homeland.

This means, ethnic parties know well advance that they have no chance of forming a national government on their own through a democratic election. If they want to come to power, they must invent undemocratic means, a bogus election, a hollow coalition, a coup d'état, or an armed insurrection. The anti-democratic route to power inspires resistance from the excluded ethnic parties. The result is divisiveness, instability, and possibly secessionism, as the three “founding fathers” had intended.

Because extremism is an exclusionary ideology, it is intrinsically segregationist or separatist. No ethnic political party, moderate or extremist, claims to fight for the wellbeing of other ethnic groups. The name says it all: the TPLF, OLF, ONLF, ALF, and others. When an extremist party is in power, it spawns the conditions amenable for other extremists to espouse secessionism. The exclusionary political program of an ethnic party forces it at best to ignore, at worst, to suppress the collective rights of other ethnic groups. Having captured the government through undemocratic means and lacking popular support, the ethnic party in power must rule with an iron fist.

To stay in power, such a government will also favour members of its own ethnic group in the distribution of resources and services. The authoritarian rule and the inequity in the distribution of resources spur the oppressed to struggle for their rights, but their legitimate struggle for equality and democracy can easily be hijacked by power-hungry separatist politicians. Of course, who champions secessionism hinges on who is in power currently. Among extremists, the advocacy for secessionism is a function of political power. Those in power today, may claim to steadfastly defend national unity, but if they lose power tomorrow, they have the organizational capabilities, the ideological inspiration, and the constitutional guarantee to demand a separate ethnic republic. Extremist ethnic parties are always separatists.

Today, secessionism is so widely accepted within the Ethiopian polity that even some Amharas, historically one of the staunchest supporters of national unity, have succumbed to it. Predictably, separatist Oromos have welcomed them. When separatists dance together, national unity gets crumpled.

As argued earlier, the combination of ethnic political parties and ethnic federalism breeds authoritarianism. This tendency is re-enforced by the ideology of extremist nationalism, collectivism. Extremist nationalists exploit ethnicity to serve their political purposes, but make no ethnic distinction when suppressing human rights. In ethnic nationalism, the “interests” of the nation supersedes individual rights. Oppression directed against members of one’s own ethnic group is justified by appealing to the sacrifices that individuals must make for the good of the ethnic nation. That is why, in its extreme form, ethnic nationalism morphs into fascism. This means, today’s intolerant ethnicist agitators could become tomorrow’s ruthless dictators.

The conclusion is clear: ethnic political parties are organically incapable of solving Ethiopia’s problems. Multi-ethnic democratic political parties formed on the basis of ideology are best suited to create the conditions for peace, security, and stability; to eschew ethnic conflicts, to enhance national unity, and to establish a democratic order in Ethiopia. One hopes that such parties will have the ideological clarity, the political vision, and the popular support to address Ethiopia’s problems, including the vexing, seemingly intractable, and unresolved problem of the national question.

The endeavour to form a coalition among some ethnic parties is a step in the right direction towards eventually creating a multi-ethnic party, for the attempt to solve the national question through the creation of ethnic parties and ethnic federalism has failed miserably. That experiment has led to a dead end; it may well be heading towards a deadly end. To avoid the impending crisis, Ethiopia merits a democratic alternative solution.

How can Ethiopians unite to forestall the ominous threats of extremist nationalism? We must create a movement that recognizes past ethnic injustices, exposes the false assertions of the ethnic fundamentalists, and accepts a set of common objectives. Such a movement, as exemplified by the activities of our Oromo brothers and sisters in the social media, is already underway. It is a most welcome development.

When calling for unity across all ethnic groups against extremism, we should begin by acknowledging past injustices. In the past, there was class oppression of all Ethiopians, but there was also national oppression of the non-Amhara ethnic groups, as well as religious discrimination. This a historical fact. No, we should not blame one ethnic group. No, we should not dwell on it. Nor should we tolerate the falsification, exaggeration, or fabrication of history by extremists. Indeed, falsehood, no matter where it comes from, must be exposed. Ethnic hatred must be challenged, while ethnic injustices, past and present, must be acknowledged.

There is a lesson to be learnt from ordinary Ethiopians of all ethnic groups. Despite the various attempts by extremists to inflame ethnic conflict over the last 25 years, the Ethiopian people have rejected the politics of ethnic animosity, divisiveness, discord, and violence. Instead, they have embraced the politics of ethnic reconciliation, consensus, and harmony. Unfortunately, extremism flourishes among some members of the elite, particularly in the diaspora.

One way of bridging the gulf between the elites of the various ethnic groups, particularly between the Amharas and the Oromos, is accepting past injustices and agreeing on a mutually acceptable set of objectives to chart the future; looking in the back mirror to move forward. To deny Ethiopia's imperfect historical past is to sabotage the common struggle for a united, democratic, and prosperous Ethiopia.

Therefore, non-Oromos, especially the Amharas, have a moral duty to accept the historical wrongs committed against the Oromo people and the other ethnic groups. At the same time, some of our Oromo brothers and sisters who may have been misled by separatist rhetoric, should accept the indisputable historical fact that Ethiopia is the nation that their ancestors built. It would be foolish to destroy their own home, as some extremist Oromo groups have vowed. Acknowledging past injustices, celebrating our common history, and envisioning our mutual destiny are imperative for building the new Ethiopia, an Ethiopia where all ethnic groups are treated equally.

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