



የኢትዮጵያ:የመረጃ:አገልግሎት:አወታር:በሆላንድ::  
Ethiopian Information Service Network In Holland  
P. O. BOX 17618 - 1001 JM AMSTERDAM HOLLAND

# **Ecological Degradation, Ethno-Nationalism And Political Conflict In Ethiopia**

**By**

**Assefa Negash, M. D.**

## ***Introductory Notes***

*Conventional political discourse on Ethiopia's problems has tended to focus attention on the so-called nationalities question. Currently the ascendant political assumption is that the nationalities question is the major problem of Ethiopia and accordingly the last three years have seen the catapulting of the nationalities question on top of the agenda. At the risk of swimming against the tide of conventional wisdom and ruffling the feathers of many a reader, I contend that the so-called national/nationality question - which is today elevated onto a higher political pedestal - is hardly germane to the issue of survival that has confronted millions of Ethiopians across ethnic and regional divide. In spite of EPRDF's self-serving media hype regarding the sanctity of the "national question", for millions of Ethiopians the issue of survival from one day to the other continues to be the overriding concern, if not the paramount daily preoccupation, that haunts them like a spectre. If anything, the impending famine which is hanging like a sword of Damocles on 11 million Ethiopians<sup>1</sup> does not rhyme with this diagnosis of the nationalities question as being Ethiopia's malady. The issue of the concatenation or relation between environmental stress and political conflict has rarely been taken up by those who have been dominating the political discourse in Ethiopia. I am not in the least trying to reduce all of Ethiopia's current crisis to environmental causes since no one single variable can explain away Ethiopia's conundrums as myriads of factors underlie Ethiopia's current malady. The interplay of a host of structural factors such as the nature of the political system, the subsistence economy, the dead-weight of socio-cultural institutions and the physical environment, etc underlie Ethiopia's current problems although I have to admit that the political system has a determinant role in mitigating or exacerbating the influence of these other factors.*

*If I am reflecting on this issue, it is because I feel that environmental degradation - one of the least recognized challenges facing Ethiopia today - not only deserves mention in passing; but must be given due attention as the consequences of environmental neglect not only are degrading the natural environment, but also dehumanizing society and brutalizing people. Ethiopia has not only witnessed the degradation of its physical environment but also the concomitant degradation of its very social environment which has been characterized by increasing level of violence, displacement, internicine war, etc. The bloody wars that raged in northern Ethiopia during the last*

*decades are a sad commentary on the level of poverty, hopelessness and desperation that have driven hundreds of thousands of disgruntled young people into being cannon fodders for ethnonationalists bent on the seizure of state power - which is by far the major source of wealth and resources in Ethiopia. Environmental degradation, which is in part a symptom of the an ever declining agrarian economy, and the attendant rural poverty and desperation has created a class of marginalised and impoverished desperados that have no respect for the values, mores and institutions of the society of which they are a part but from which they are alienated by thousand and one ways. Environmentally degraded areas like Tigray have continued to be fertile niches of nationalism by pushing desperate peasants into the arm-fold of ethnonationalists. Although I sincerely doubt the acquaintance of EPLF/TPLF's leaders with theories of social Darwinists, I submit that in practice they have, during the last three years in power, excellently proven to the world how the fittest group in society (Tigreans/Eritreans) can survive today at the expense of non-Tigreans even if that meant deriving one's existential needs by depriving and starving fellow countrymen (non-Tigreans).*

*In what follows I would try to reflect on the ethnogenesis of a nationalist movement which came into existence, ex nihilo, 18 years ago and has come to dominate the political life of Ethiopia in ways which could have been unthinkable just a few years ago. The issue of, ecological degradation, is at the root of the material condition which has unleashed the very force (TPLF/EPRDF) that has succeeded in changing the political history of Ethiopia. I argue that, contrary to the nationalist mythology propagated by Tigrean nationalists who blame the problem of Tigray on an alleged Amhara rule and national oppression, it was the adverse ramifications of environmental degradation that triggered the rise of a virulent strain of Tigrean ethnonationalism. This does not mean, however, that there are no socio-cultural and historical factors that have engendered Tigrean nationalism. I only hope that this reflection would provoke a debate on the least recognized, yet important, subject of environmental degradation facing Ethiopia. Recognizing the concatenation between environmental degradation and the attendant economic decay of areas like Tigray would, I believe, help us understand the reactive retreat into ethnonationalism by groups like TPLF which in their drive to seize state power - by far the only source of wealth and distributor of resources in economically backward countries like Ethiopia - have fallen back on the time-honoured reinvention of ethnonationalism as a means of political mobilization. As events of recent years bear out, in a country like Ethiopia, where the socio-economic integration of the society is weak, social fragmentation and poverty pronounced, societal fabric weakened by war and ethno-regional identities compete with pan-Ethiopian identity; groups like TPLF can politicize ethnicity for narrow political goals.*

### ***The Scope of Ecological Degradation in Ethiopia***

*The Ethiopian highlands are characterized by high demographic pressure, near-total dependence on a subsistence agriculture with no margins of safety in times of crisis. According to Mesfin Woldemariam subsistence agriculture is characterized by 1) small and fragmented land; 2) primitive farm implements; 3) production geared to personal consumption than to market, 4) lack of alternative or seasonal employment opportunities; 5) almost total absence of reserves of either grain or cash<sup>2</sup> etc. 88% of the Ethiopian population is concentrated on the highlands (areas above 1500 meter in altitude) which comprise only 43% of the the Ethiopian land surface; while 12% of the population lives in the lowlands (areas below 1500 meter in altitude) that constitute 57% of the total land surface of Ethiopia<sup>3</sup>. The Ethiopian highlands support close to 80% of the total Tropical Livestock population excluding camels<sup>4</sup>. The lack of capital and technology has forced*

*the rural population (which represents 89% of the total population of Ethiopia) into a deepening dependence on and concomitant depletion of one of the main factors of production - land. In the absence of adequate technology and capital to meet societies growing needs for food, fuel and survival, increasing demographic pressure has led to increasing overuse of available resources thereby leading to degradation of the physical environment.*

*The demographic pressure on the highlands has led to environmental stress (overgrazing, soil erosion, deforestation, etc) that has come to affect many parts of highland Ethiopia. Ethiopia loses a total of 1,5 billion metric tons of top soil a year<sup>5</sup>. On average 12 tons of top soil per hectare per year are lost<sup>6</sup>. Croplands represent just 15% of the total land surface of Ethiopia. The average soil loss from these croplands is estimated at 42 metric tons/hectare/year<sup>7</sup>. The economic cost of land degradation are enormous. According to a report released by FAO in 1986, land degradation will cost Ethiopia over 15 billion Birr in the next 25 years. This amounts to a loss of 600 million Birr or an annual loss of 120,000 tons of cereals<sup>8</sup>. In Ethiopia 200,000 hectares of forest/woodland is destroyed every year<sup>9</sup>. Lack of fuel wood in many parts of Ethiopia has forced people to use dung and crop residue as source of fuel. This in turn robs the land the organic matter which would have gone into enriching the soil. The attendant biological degradation brought about by this usage annually reduces soil productivity by 1% <sup>10</sup>. Land degradation affects the agricultural production of Ethiopia on the order of 2% decrease rate per year<sup>11</sup>. The highlands, where 90% of all the croplands are concentrated, have suffered tremendous land degradation caused by overcultivation, overgrazing, devegetation and population pressure. Of these highlands, 76% of the cropland has been severely eroded, 4% has ceased to produce food, and only 20% remains to be least affected by erosion. Based on this present assesment by the year 2010, 18% of the Ethiopian highlands will be converted into bare rock and 10 million Ethiopians will not be able to produce anything from this land<sup>12</sup>. The increasing level of environmental degradation and desertification in Ethiopia is further corroborated by the increaing shift of the frontiers of vector-borne diseases like Malaria towards the highlands of Ethiopia which were hitherto free from malaria <sup>13</sup>.*

### ***Impact of the Ethiopian Land Tenure Systems on the Environment***

*The land tenure system before 1974 also wrecked havoc with the environment in two ways. First there was the problem of land fragmentation - a chronic feature of Ethiopia in general, and northern Ethiopia in particular - which admittedly, has contributed significantly to the environmental degradation process. In the second place, the periodic redistribution of land inherent in the Rist system and the paritible nature of land in northern Ethiopia used to create insecurity of tenure. This insecurity of tenure inherent in the land tenure system tended to prevent or preclude any agricultural innovation and capital investment however small. After the 1975 land proclamation act, all rural land was nationalized and put at the disposal of the Ethiopian state. The land nationalization bill abolished communal ownership of land and tenancy in northern and southern Ethiopia respectively, thereby distributing land to the very tillers. Henceforth, peasants have only usufruct rights while land ownership remained to be the prerogative of the state.*

*Initially, during the first two years (1975-1976), when the oppressive clutch of the central government was at its weakest, peasants, particularly those in southern Ethiopia, were able to benefit from the land reform bill. But with time, the Ethiopian peasants came under the increasing clutches and control of the peasant associations. The peasant associations became instruments and appendages of a highly centralized military government that subjected the peasants to various obligations (grain quotas, obligatory contribution to Dergue's war effort) and taxations thereby*

reimposing an extractive, oppressive system on the peasants. This hampered production, destroyed incentives of peasants and led to rural inertia and apathy which Dessalegn Rahmato aptly termed "agricultural involution" <sup>14</sup>. Peasants had no incentives to invest their energy and meagre resources on their farms over which they had no ownership rights. All this blocked agricultural innovation in rural Ethiopia which would have been able to offset the effects of population growth (currently 3% <sup>15</sup>) that by far outstrips food production which has dropped from 1,2% (for the period 1965-1968) to -3,9% (for the period 1980-1986) <sup>16</sup>. The rate of population growth has jumped from 2,1% in 1950 to 3,0% in 1994 while the country which has been a net exporter of food before 1955 <sup>17</sup> is now dependent on food import and periodic international munificence or famine-relief handouts. Ethiopia's food imports have ratcheted up from 6% in 1965 to 20% in 1986 while cereal imports (excluding food aid) have jumped from 118,000 metric tons in 1974 to 1,047,000 metric tons in 1986 (a nine fold increase in just 12 years) <sup>18</sup>. At the current rate of population growth, in 1994 alone 1,7 million people have been added to Ethiopia's population. Ethiopia, which is currently the third populous country in Africa next only to Nigeria and Egypt, will have overtaken Egypt at the end of this century - thereby becoming the second largest populous country in Africa.

In the absence of adequate agricultural technology, capital investment and alternative employment opportunities, the cumulative effect of this population growth has led to increasing pressure on land and natural resources such as forest/woodland, grassland etc, thereby depleting these resources to a point where such damages have become irreversible in some areas. Further the neglect of the smallholder farmer or peasant by successive governments has undermined environmental conservation efforts. Thus in their quest for survival, the Ethiopian peasants have been forced into a process of agricultural practice that further undermined the very basis of rural life - i.e land and other natural resources. The much-vaunted land proclamation bill has neither solved the problem of land fragmentation nor the insecurity of tenure - two chronic problems which continue to wreck havoc with the environment. If anything, the post-1975 agricultural policies of the military government attempted at redefining the relationship between the urban (center of political power) and rural population of Ethiopia in a way which favoured the former. The central government had to impose an extractive system on the rural population in order to finance the burgeoning, if parasitical, urban elite (army, civil service) which has shown an increasing expansion in the post-1974 period.

Having sketched the general contours of the environmental problem in Ethiopia, I now turn to Tigray and the Tigrean Liberation Front, alias EPRDF, with which I will deal at length to showcase the concatenation or relationship, albeit indirectly, between environmental degradation and political conflict in this region. More often than not the discussion of Ethiopia's current problems is immured in the ramparts of far-fetched academic discussion such as the now fashionable "national question" that has no direct relation to the real or felt-needs and problems of Ethiopia. There is a need to push the frontiers of our discussions beyond the rhetorical nuances on the elusive "national question" which currently enjoys wide political currency.

### **Profile of Tigray - the Ethnic Home Area of EPRDF**

Tigray is a densely populated area of northern Ethiopia - a region which has one of the longest recorded history of human settlement and plough farm in sub-Saharan Africa. Tigray occupies 5,4% (66212 sq kms) of the total surface area of Ethiopia. The majority of the population is dependent on subsistence agriculture. A small, yet, powerful class of Tigrean businessmen along with their Eritrean kins dominate the lucrative commercial life of Ethiopia. The small Gurage

business community is by far the only ethnic group that occupies a place remotely approximating to the Tigrean business class. Only 0,3% of the Tigrean land surface is covered by forest/woodland. As in many parts of Ethiopia, subsistence agriculture has remained to be the mainstay of the economy. Agriculture still relies on primitive methods of production. With central and eastern Wello; eastern Gondar; north eastern and southern Shoa; Eritrea and the highlands of Hararghe, Tigray is one of the regions most frequently affected by recurrent spells of drought and famine. Unlike areas like Hararghe though, Tigray has no cash crops (like Khat and Coffee) to buffer the effects of dwindling agricultural income and the effects of demographic pressure.

Recurrent spells of drought are common and famine stalks Tigray frequently. Generally drought and famine form an enduring feature of this region. High demographic pressure coupled with increasing level of land fragmentation, a backward agricultural practice, absence of alternative employment opportunities, have brought an increasing environmental pressure and stress to bear upon Tigray and other northern regions of Ethiopia. This has severely disturbed the delicate balance between nature and man. This imbalance in the relative carrying capacity of the land and the increasing population pressure has in turn exposed the population to severe problems. The inability of the political system at the center to adequately respond to these urgent socio-economic problems has further led to the exacerbation of the problems which, more often than not, have forced the population into desperation. Before the 1975 land nationalization bill, hundreds of thousands of Tigreans used to migrate into other areas of Ethiopia in order to work on the commercial farms by way of supplementing their insufficient agricultural incomes.

#### **Land Nationalization - And Its Impact on Migratory Labor**

Following the 1974 military take over, the new military government nationalized all rural lands. The effect of the land nationalization bill in northern Ethiopia was minimal as communal ownership of the land was the rule there before 1975. Many commercial farms which sprang up in the 1960's and 1970's were nationalized after 1975 and converted into state farms that fell under a centralized, rather commandist government control. Corruption, vice and inefficiency characterized the performance of state farms. Other commercial farms such as the ones located in the Gondar region (Setit Humera, Metema, etc) of northern Ethiopia were abandoned altogether due to the ensuing political instability and war in the region. War-cum-political instability fuelled by the policies of the Dergue regime and the militaristic stance of the ethnonationalist opposition groups turned regions like the Setit Humera/Metema corridor into a war zone thereby destroying the economic base of this potentially rich region. I cite some statistical data that can shed light on the level of economic activity in the region before 1975. According to one report the Humera-Metema corridor used to employ over 190,000 people in agricultural and service sectors; and another 300,000 people were employed as seasonal labourers. Next to the Gondares, those who used to work on these farms came from the deficit-ridden, ecologically degraded regions of Tigray and Eritrea. The Setit Humera/Metema region was the second largest producer of cotton next to the Awash Valley. This region used to produce an estimated 1,2 million quintals of sesame, 2,5 million quintals of sorghum, 0,5 million quintals of corn annually. More than 2500 tractors were used in the area for farming and the capital investment in the region before 1975 was estimated at 500 million Birr (then an equivalent of 250 million US dollars) <sup>19</sup>.

As we observed above, following the land nationalization bill, all the budding commercial farms owned by individuals and share holders were turned overnight into state properties. The corruption, lack of incentive, maladministration that ensued afterwards reduced these state farms

into cumbersome economic burdens that only sapped the nation's meagre resources. Thus all these factors undermined the economic viability of these farms thereby leading to a concomitant contraction of employment opportunities for surplus labor power from ecologically degraded regions like Tigray. The land nationalization bill further arrested, and totally destroyed, the growing trend of the 1970's whereby an increasing number of private entrepreneurs were beginning to invest in large scale mechanized farms which were opening broad employment opportunities for peasants thereby helping the latter to earn supplementary income by employing themselves as agricultural labourers. All this led to the contraction of employment opportunities for hundreds of thousands of agricultural labourers which used to seek employment on these farms by migrating to the Awash Valley, Setit Humera, Metema, southwestern Ethiopia, etc. Particularly people from ecologically degraded, food deficit-ridden areas like Tigray who used to seek their fortune beyond the barren hills of Tigray were affected most. According to John Markakis, Tigreans accounted for as much as 27% of all migrant labor in Ethiopia<sup>20</sup>. After 1975, the restriction on migration, by far the only remaining safety-valve for Tigrean peasants who were not able to sustain themselves on their degraded plots, led to resentment, hopelessness and apathy that crystallized into social dissatisfaction that was tapped effectively by a virulent nationalist cabal - the TPLF, alias EPRDF. This economic marginalisation, and not the fictitious **Amhara national oppression**, was what accounted for the geographical locus of the armed resistance in northern Ethiopia including Tigray, northern Wollo, parts of Gondar, etc during the last 17 years of military rule.

At the height of the 1984/1985 Ethiopian famine, a British environmentalist Lloyd Timerlake, who has been closely following the unfolding drama of environmental degradation and the attendant political conflict being fuelled by this environmental decay, queried **"To what extent were Tigreans fighting against the Ethiopian government because that government was overseeing their region's decline into bare hills and barren ground ?"**<sup>21</sup> Ofcourse the Ethiopian government was not only overseeing the decline of Tigray's region alone, but also other regions like Wollo, Gondar, Gojjam, northern Shoa, highlands of Hararghe, Gomu Gofa, etc which are also undergoing serious environmental degradation.

Further the inability of the central government to respond to the chronic needs of the Ethiopian peasants and its reluctance to invest in the peasant sector by way of introducing agricultural innovations (like irrigation, soil conservation), providing adequate marketing structures, creating alternative employment opportunities to peasants from ecologically degraded regions and the socialist government's rigid, if doctrinaire, agricultural and economic policies severely alienated the peasants of northern Ethiopia early on. It was this army of unemployed rural surplus labor that served as grist to the mill of nationalist agitation in areas like Tigray. It was not, as the Tigrean nationalist mythology would have us believe **"Amhara national oppression"** which underlies the genesis of the Tigrean nationalist movement as much as ecological degradation, rural poverty and desperation. Ecological degradation and the attendant crisis in rural agriculture were the proximate causes of the nationalist upheaval in Tigray. Even on the candid admission of Gebru Tareke - a historian from Tigray and currently an admirer of TPLF - **"There is a direct correlation between a perilous physical environment and the ecology of insurrection"**<sup>22</sup>

Ironically enough, it was from northern Ethiopia which had traditionally dominated the Ethiopian polity that the main armed resistance to the central government has been witnessed. On the other hand, southern Ethiopia which was traditionally peripheral to the Ethiopian power politics and subjected to land alienation, and economic exploitation before 1974; remained the most quiescent region during the 17 years of the Dergue's rule. How do we account for this anomaly and

explain away the conspicuously restive political behaviour of the north (which does not in the least fit with the "national oppression" theory) and the rather quiescent political behaviour of the southerners who can justifiably claim to have been subjected to economic exploitation and political alienation before 1974? This seeming anomaly can generally be explained by the fact that areas of northern Ethiopia such as Tigray and, to some extent, northern Wello etc, experienced economic marginalisation and ecological degradation which was not in the least tackled by the central government. For a peasant society, the question of survival is pivotal as the the issue of survival and degree of desperation caused by rural poverty determines the peasant's resolve to take up arms. Groups like OLF failed to mobilize the Oromos against the Dergue because the Oromo peasants, unlike their Tigrean counterparts, were not faced by the question of survival and desperation to the point of taking up arms.

Speaking about restrictions on migratory labor, the present Ethiopian leader Meles Zenawi (in what I call Meles's rare moment of truth telling) intimated the following to Paul Henze of Rand Corporation regarding the number of Tigreans living outside the province of Tigray. Meles Zenawi said that "Probably a third of all Tigreans live in other parts of Ethiopia. Tigreans have always migrated, some to stay and others as temporary labourers. That was one of the things that alienated Tigreans from the Derge very early. Land reform did not anger people in Tigray as much as the restrictions on seasonal labor migrations. Tigreans used to go to many parts of the country to work, sometimes for half year. They brought their earnings home to support their families and invest in their farms. There was no part of Ethiopia where money earned in this way was more important to the people. The Dergue was stupid to forbid this for it forced our people into poverty and hopelessness and it gave our movement important support from the beginning"<sup>23</sup>. Thus social dissatisfaction that fed on the dire diet of economic marginalisation and environmental degradation and not "Amhara national oppression" was the immediate and proximate cause of the long drawn-out war from which the EPRDF emerged as a victor by recruiting desperate peasants from Tigray and the predominantly Amhara regions of northern Wello, Gondar and northern Shoa. Hence the absurdity of the notion of "Amhara national oppression in Tigray" that is being repeated ad nauseam like a piece of rhapsody by groups running the gamut from Tigrean nationalists to pseudo-academics and ball-pen mercenaries<sup>24</sup>.

### ***Debunking the Myth of "Amhara National Oppression" in Tigray***

One of the mythologies and accusations repeated ad nauseam by Tigrean nationalists is that they have suffered national oppression at the hands of the Amharas. For them the successive Ethiopian governments (from Menelik to the military government) have imposed Amhara rule on their region thereby deliberately exploiting and depriving their region. To date, no Tigrean intellectual worth his salt has been able to come out with arguments that can substantiate such accusations which are based more on hatred than rational arguments. I argue that there was no such a thing as Amhara national oppression in Tigray that was imposed on it by the so called Amhara rulers. In fact Tigray was the region which until 1974 had enjoyed a unique autonomous status under its own traditional rulers and the region least affected by the overbearing centralization policy of Haile Sellase (in the post-war period of 1941-1974) than any other region of Ethiopia including the so called Amhara regions. Commenting on the pre-1974 Ethiopia, Christopher Clapham observed "The northern Amhara regions have - paradoxically for the stereotype which sees Ethiopian politics in terms of Amhara domination - been rather less well represented in the central government than either Eritrea or Tigray"<sup>25</sup>. Tigray has better infrastructure (roads, schools, communication, health facilities, etc) than these Amhara regions like Wello, northern Shoa,



*Gondar or Gojjam. Tigray has sent more students to university than Gondar and Gojjam together which have more than twice the population of Tigray.*

*In fact the resentment of Tigreans vis a vis the central governments cannot be attributed to economic exploitation of the former by the latter. Economic marginalisation rather than economic exploitation<sup>26</sup> was what was at issue and this was not unique to Tigray since other regions were equally victims of such marginalisation. These marginalised regions include the predominantly Amhara inhabited regions of northern and central Ethiopia which are wrongly accused by Tigrean nationalists as having benefitted under successive "Amhara regimes". Prior to 1974, one can hardly speak of exploitation of Tigrean peasants by the central government to the degree suffered by peasants in the south. This is so because the Tigrean peasant, unlike his counterpart in southern Ethiopia, owned the means of production (land) and was not in the least incorporated in the world market through exportable cash crops extracted from these regions. Economic marginalisation rather than economic exploitation of Tigray created dissatisfaction among the millions of peasants whose existence could no more be sustained by dependence on the barren and ecologically degraded environment of Tigray.*

*Let me digress a bit to reflect on an oft-repeated allegation by Tigray-Tigrign nationalists about the alleged Amhara domination of their region. Here, I take up issue with their unsubstantiated, if misleading, assertion which alleges Amhara domination and the economic exploitation of areas like Eritrea and Tigray. According to Africa Confidential Newsletter publication (April 1993 issue), Eritrea got more funding than all other Ethiopian provinces put together with the exception of Shoa, and for the most part of the last 20 years it contributed no taxes"<sup>27</sup>. According to another source, "Out of 76 industrial plants established in Eritrea, 39 were established in the 62 years of colonial rule (all most all of them were established between 1933-1935 just as Italy was preparing itself for a full-scale colonization of Ethiopia) while 37 industrial plants were established in the 16 years of federation (1952-1961) and post-federation (after 1961). Between 1962-1964 alone, 36 industrial plants were established in Eritrea. By 1957, the total industrial capital in Eritrea amounted to 16,739,000 Birr (28% of the total industrial capital of Ethiopia including Eritrea) while the amount for Ethiopia (excluding Eritrea) was 44,000,000 Birr (72% of the total industrial capital of Ethiopia). By 1969, this amount has grown to 153,595,000 Birr for Eritrea (45% of the total industrial capital of Ethiopia including Eritrea) and just 188,768,000 Birr for Ethiopia (55% of the total industrial capital of Ethiopia including Eritrea). 45% of the total capital investment of Ethiopia was invested in Eritrea. Educationally, the percentage increase in the enrollment of students for Eritrea in 1959-1960 amounted to 23,27% while this figure for the rest of the Ethiopian empire amounted to just 7,94%. The percentage increase in number of schools was 10,15% for Eritrea and just 4,99% for the rest of the whole empire"<sup>28</sup> " (emphasis mine). This is a fact which has never been mentioned by Eritrean nationalists and their overzealous expatriate supporters. Do the rhetorical nuances of national oppression and exploitation of Eritrea stand close scrutiny in view of these hard facts rarely mentioned by those dominating the political discourse ? Thus the question of Amhara domination and exploitation of Eritrea becomes meaningless and holds no water. It was not only Tigray which was economically marginalised and progressively excluded from the market but also the Amhara regions of Gondar, Wello, northern Shoa, and other parts of Ethiopia like Gomu Gofa, Bale, etc. Gojjam is an exception to this economic marginalisation (but not exploitation) in that it is one of the main producers of locally marketable surplus grain, thereby playing a significant role in the Ethiopian economy. Is it then Amhara domination or national oppression which also explains the economic marginalisation and neglect of these Amhara regions ? Tigrean nationalists have to tell us the answer.*



## **Notes on Nationalism And The Meteoric Rise of TPLF**

*Ethnonationalism is a political ideology which plays on the primordial, if raw, sentiments of people to advance its goals. Ethnonationalism gives ready made, often simplistic, answers to societal problems of mammoth proportion thereby rhetorically pandering to the passion of the deprived and marginalised poor. Ethnonationalism is exclusive and, more often than not, tends to freeze ethnic identities. Ethnonationalism is anathema to the very cosmopolitan and universalist ideals that uphold the supremacy of all human beings irrespective of ethnic origin, cultural shibboleith, skin color or religion. Ethnonationalism tends to endow people with exclusive rather, ascriptive cultural and historical identities as against universalist values and mores. Today ethnonationalism a la EPRDF is magnifying and resurrecting some of the negative symbols and memories of our collective past while simultaneously destroying all vestiges of our collective positive memories of cooperation, intermingling and harmonious coexistence forged by successive generations of Ethiopians. When ethnonationalism merges with poverty and socio-economic distress as is the case with Tigrean nationalism, it can prove to be an explosive powder keg with adverse ramifications such as those we have witnessed in Ethiopia during the last three years of EPRDF's ethnonationalist rule. Hence the need to shed light on the genesis of EPRDF - the ethnonationalist cabal fast dragging Ethiopia on a dangerous political course with possible reverberations beyond the Ethiopian borders. EPRDF is trying to sanctify ethnic identity by forcefully imposing and freezing ethnicity as the guiding political ideology of Ethiopian society. Since its seizure of power in May 1991, EPRDF's policy of divide et impera has led to the replacement of Ethiopian nationalism with multiple ethnic nationalisms.*

*The TPLF, alias EPRDF, is an organization which has been created in the mid seventies by Tigrean urban elites that were drawn from the urban areas (teachers, college and highschool dropouts). Some of these Tigrean nationalists like Meles Tekle - the mentor of Ethiopia's present leader Meles Zenawi, have been masquerading as Marxists within the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). With the advantage of a hindsight, we understand today that the ESM had been harbouring within itself forces inimical to the very notion of Ethiopia. That the ESM was a very propitious niche of anti-Ethiopian renegade nationalism has become clear today than ever before. The fact that the student movement served as a convenient springboard from which the anti-Ethiopian renegade nationalists currently in power (EPRDF/EPLF) and in the opposition (ELF/OLF) were able to advance their cause i.e the destruction of Ethiopian identity and its replacement by an ethnocentric nationalist reconstruct is not to be denied. This does not however mean that Ethiopian students have not made positive contributions in voicing the plight of their people for which thousands of them have paid with their lives by braving death, while tens of thousands have been imprisoned or have run the gauntlet of exilment.*

### **Ethno-Nationalist Historiography and Nationalist Agitation**

*Having sketched above the economic and social context within which Tigrean nationalism grew up, it is now time to throw some light on the historical and cultural matrices which facilitated the rather malignant growth of exclusivist, Tigrean ethnonationalism.*

*The past and whatever happened in it occupies a significant place in all ethnonationalist political discourse and historiography. As a political ideology that is circumscribed in time and space and lacking in vision to fashion the present and future in a constructive way, ethnonationalism obsessively fixates itself on the illusive past. Ethnonationalists have neither the intellectual*

acumen nor the political perspicacity to constructively engage themselves in the task of reconstructing society. Ethnonationalism harks back on history and culture to restore the past - to resurrect the illusive greatness and dignity of the by-gone centuries as a means of mobilizing people for current political goals. The TPLF as a virulent nationalist organization, has effectively used an elusive historical memory to mobilize Tigreans. Here it is appropriate to quote at length - a Tigrean nationalist and former chairman of TPLF Aregawi Berhe - who in 1992 wrote: "Both the TPLF press and radio had to arouse the national feeling of the Tigreans and raise anything that could touch the aspirations and feeling of the people, sometimes in a sensational and dramatic way and at times referring to ideological dogmas and history. The question of identity, esteem and values of the Tigrean people that had been ignored, despised and forced to assimilate with the dominant Amhara nationality where for the last 100 years, the ruling class of Ethiopia had come from. The question of political power, economic security, distribution of resources and status at all levels of the production process was the other dimension of the struggle. This perspective was the nationalist aspect of the struggle, with the aim to bring back and retain what had been lost in the years of Amhara rule. The poems and songs, in content and form, included what the people had lost under the subsequent Amhara regimes, and what they should pay to regain all they had lost. In other words it was a kind of mobilization to fight the dominant nationality. Moreover since the people of Tigray had the dominant Amhara as their adversary, the media had mobilized the people and united the militant forces to deal them (the dominant Amhara) an outward blow <sup>29</sup>" (emphasis mine). According to Aregawi, the now defunct military government was an Amhara government whose support and social base remained to be the Amhara people <sup>30</sup>.

Having acquainted the reader with the goal of the TPLF propaganda, in what follows we reproduce a fragment depicting the content of TPLF's typical propaganda or agitation material used during its struggle against "the regime of the dominant Amhara" - i.e the now defunct military government. On February 23 1977 (Yekatit 16, 1969 E.C), on the occasion of of Kidane Mehret (holiday), a TPLF cadre by the name of Tekeste was conducting a political agitation among the Tigrean people of Agame district (at a place called Ayere). He addressed his Tigrean audience in the following manner: "You the famous people of Tigray !! The Shoan Amharas disowned your history. By claiming the Axumite civilization as their own, the Shoan Amhara aristocrats belittled your Axumite civilization. They (Shoan Amharas) made you to be ashamed of yourself. While you (the Tigrean people) along with your leaders were defending your country against foreign invaders and your dear children dying on the battle fronts; Menelik, by colluding with foreign forces, imposed upon you (whose body was weakned by war) Shoan (Amhara) supermacy"<sup>31</sup>. True to character, Tigrean nationalism has to ground itself in history by appealing to the elusive greatness of Tigray thereby calling upon Tigreans to retrieve what has been "wrongly" taken from them by the "oppressive Amharas". Tigrean nationalists have to reconceive, reinvent and package the "glorious past" in a rather epic terms that fires the imagination of an economically disgruntled mass of Tigrean peasants. Gebru Tareke a historian from Tigray who, today unabashedly, panegyricizes and eulogizes the EPRDF government "as the first Ethiopian government ever to have come to power through the popular support of the Ethiopian people <sup>32</sup>", once wrote "To arouse collective passion and identification, they (the TPLF) have relied heavily on historical memory <sup>33</sup>". This is how Tigrean nationalism and its synthesis or embodiment - the TPLF alias EPRDF emerged to bring historical deliverance and redemption of the "historically wronged Tigrean people" that allegedly suffered humiliation under "Amhara rule" until May 1991. For a peasant society like Tigray, whose rural population is in the throes of grinding poverty, one has to devise such rhetorically nationalistic agitations in an attempt to nurse the alleged wounds suffered under Menelik - who for Tigrean nationalists and elites (past or present) is "the Amhara villain par excellence". In short Tigrean

*nationalists had to couch or frame economic marginalisation and poverty (by no means unique to Tigreans alone) in political and ethnic terms that appeal to the Tigrean peasant.*

*The attempt by Tigrean nationalists<sup>34</sup> and their expatriate supporters to blame Tigray's current backwardness and economic misfortune on Menelik's army<sup>35</sup>, fits in well with the typical historiography of ethnonationalists. Ofcourse to date, for all the plethora of accusations and allegations by Tigray-Tigrign nationalists regarding "Amhara national oppression", they could not come up with anything that remotely substantiates their thesis that the "oppressive Amhara" performed better in economic, social, educational, fields than Tigreans/Eritreans. Dr. Teshale Tibebe, an Ethiopian social scientist observed "The fact that the highest temperature in micro-nationalism in Ethiopia came from Tigray and Wellega is not due to the fact that it was in Tigray and Wellega that national domination and Amhara domination were the heaviest. Actually, it is exactly the opposite. Of all Oromo regions Wellega was under the least Amhara domination, while Tigray enjoyed the maximum autonomy possible in an imperial establishment. The fever of micronationalism in Ethiopia tended to rise in inverse proportion to the degree of Amhara domination. The mechanistic conception of less oppression, more reaction is refuted by the dialectics of social upheavals under the flag of nationalism"<sup>36</sup>.*

*In the words of one writer, in Tigray the significant overlap between geography, language, ethnicity and religion along with the rivalry of hereditary rulers, patron-client relationships and physical fragmentation have tended to constrict supra-regional consciousness<sup>37</sup> thereby entrenching regionalism. These factors, coupled with the economic marginalisation and ecological degradation of parts of Tigray, have served as a propitious conditons for the rise of Tigrean nationalism whose exponents have been the modern Tigrean elites. These modern nationalist elites cultivated exclusivist ethnonationalism by politicizing poverty - which is by no means unique to Tigray. Today Tigrean ethnonationalism is bent on destroying supra-ethnic, pan-Ethiopian identity by institutionalizing ethnicity as a guiding political ideology. We may as well add that the 17 years war against the Dergue has strengthened and sustained, if not cemented, an exclusivist Tigrean ethnic identity thereby undermining the pan-Ethiopian identity of Tigreans. That said though, today I wonder whether the Tigreans share with non-Tigreans the very notion of YILUGNETA which is a concept deeply embedded in Ethiopian culture. The catalogue of atrocities perpetrated against non-Tigreans during the last three years of EPRDF's rule starkly contrast with the acquiescence, if not explicit support, of Tigreans who more often than not have closed ranks behind EPRDF to defend whatever injustice EPRDF has visited upon non-Tigreans. In view of this Tigrean acquiescence and their near-total support for the abhorrent policies of EPRDF, I wonder whether the Tigrean sense of justice can transcend ethnic barrier and divide. I wonder whether in the short term, Tigreans would be able to overcome the present temptations of basking in the privilege (be it political, social or economic) that they have by virtue of being Tigreans or choose to close ranks with the EPRDF at the expense of alienating themselves from the millions of non-Tigreans being victimized by an ethnocratic government. I suggest that others well qualified in various fields probe into other areas so that we can better understand the Tigrean nationalists, their ethnogenesis, ethnopsychology and political behaviour.*

### ***Ethiopia Between Scylla and Charybdis***

*The rule of the military government has contributed greatly to the success of the Tigrean nationalists. Following the bloody suppression of the urban civilian opposition in the late seventies (1977-1979) and the traumatic extermination of a generation of dedicated, albeit misguided, youth*

by the military government; a period of political inertia and obmutescence set in (1979-1991). It was a period during which, to borrow W.B. Yeats's words, "The best lacked all conviction, while the worst were full of passionate intensity"<sup>38</sup>. Apathy, withdrawal, hopelessness replaced the sense of patriotism seen among the Ethiopian youth. With thousands killed, tens of thousands imprisoned and exiled, the rest muzzled out, the political center-stage was left to two contending militarists - i.e Tigrean/Eritrean ethnonationalists and the military government. With hindsight, this proved to be the undoing of Ethiopia we witness today. It also proved to be the serious mistake for which we are paying dearly today as we left the political initiative to two militaristic contenders - the Dergue and the ethnonationalists from the north - for whom there is no price too high, including of course the very destruction of Ethiopia, as long as that brings them to power.

Forthwith, Ethiopia was left without any democratic alternative. In a manner reminiscent of the old Greek mythology, the Ethiopian people were caught between the Scylla of anti-Ethiopian ethnonationalists and the Charybdis of a military dictatorship (the Dergue). Avoidance of either of these two extremes meant exposure to the other. The Dergue's unpopular policies such as villagization, centralization policy, suffocatingly commandist economic policy, repression, the war policy alienated further the Ethiopian population. The pressganging and forced conscription of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian youth into a senseless war further alienated Ethiopians. The Tigrean/Eritrean nationalists capitalized on all these latent dissatisfaction and disillusionment of the Ethiopian people in their fight against the central government - which had alienated itself from the Ethiopian people. Thus by the time the Dergue government was ousted, the ethnonationalists became the only ones to fill the political hiatus left behind by Dergue's exit. Although the Ethiopian people expected that the post-Dergue period would usher in a new political order that democratizes society and its institutions and would do away with the political alienation, economic marginalisation suffered by the Ethiopian people irrespective of ethnic, religious, regional origin or cultural shibboleith, the political gurus of the nouveau regime of EPRDF instituted ethnic politics and ethnic social organization as the panacea for all Ethiopia's ills. Thus began the second chapter in the sad, if tragic, history of Ethiopia. From here on the anachronistic ethnic policy prepared long ago by these ethnonationalists, who are anathema to the very concept of creating a democratized Ethiopian state, was officially launched. Ethnicization, and not democratization of the Ethiopian state, became the paramount, if neurotic, preoccupation of the incumbent Tigrean regime and its erstwhile coalition partners like OLF, etc. With the inauguration of ethnic politics, Ethiopia's Pandora Box<sup>39</sup> was opened - with all the adverse ramifications thereof. The unsightly, if grim, spectacle of massacres perpetrated in Bedeno, Arba Gugu<sup>40</sup>, Arsi Negelle, Metekel, Water, Dire Dawa, Areka, Wolkaiyet Tsegede, Dansha, and recently in Gondar<sup>41</sup> are not only telling examples bearing out our legitimate fears and worries regarding the evils of ethnic politics but also harbingers of great dangers to come yet. The displacement, destabilization, and political and social instability caused by EPRDF's ethnic politics in areas south of Tigray are to a great extent responsible for the famine crisis that is threatening the lives of millions currently.

The July 1, 1991 conference in Addis Ababa was a culmination in the process of ethnicisation of Ethiopian politics that has long since been the agenda of the Tigray-Tigrign nationalists who would go to any length to dismantle Ethiopia as long as that guaranteed them the political, economic and social supremacy of Tigray and Eritrea. Notwithstanding its deceptive adoption of the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter of the Transitional Government has been a deceptively convenient instrument meant to facilitate the dismantling of Ethiopia and institutionalize an ethnocratic rule in Ethiopia. The dismantling of Ethiopia was and still remains to be the only means of guaranteeing Eritrean independence and

*Tigray-Tigrign nationalsit supermacy. Today three years after the assumption of power by the EPLF, the political independence of Eritrea could not be matched by economic independence. Hence Eritrea's increasing dependence on Ethiopia by turning Ethiopia into its economic backyard or colony. This dismantling of Ethiopia is being done by the marionette EPRDF government which is committed to the dismantling of Ethiopia as the only condition for the building of a prosperous Eritrea and Tigray. The economic pillage of Ethiopia, the transfer and relocation of resources to Eritrea/Tigray, the Tigreanization of the Ethiopian state, the ethnic cleansings currently underway, corroborate the degree to which Ethiopian national interests are subordinated to the overriding interest of Tigray and Eritrea. It should be remembered that the OLF which is anathema to the very concept of Ethiopia and is bent on the creation of a fictitious "Oromia state" also jumped on the bandwagon of EPRDF hoping to promote its sectarian interests. For OLF no price (including the very destruction of life and property or civil war) was too high, then and still today, as long as that leads to the creation of Oromia state. In the next article which will follow this one, I will attempt to present with the help of fact and figures the records of the ethnonationalist Tigrean regime which has continued to deEthiopianize every facet of our national heritage and institutions. I will argue that, contrary to the the mythology currently peddled around by various groups, including even some opposition political groups who characterize EPRDF as a Marxist/communist force - EPRDF is a Tigrean nationalist organization which has millions of followers among Tigrigna speaking population of Tigray and Eritrea dotted around Ethiopia and beyond. It is hightime that we stop deluding ourselves in believing that the current dismantling of Ethiopia is only in the interest of a few ethno-nationalists bent on maintaining themselves in power. The sooner we realize that Tigray-Tigrign ethno-nationalism has an ethnic constituency that derives perceptible benefits from Ethiopia's dismantling, the better we prepare ourselves to shoulder the Herculean task of facing the unprecedented challenges facing the very existence of Ethiopia. EPRDF's determined effort to turn its military victory over the Dergue into political, economic and social supermacy has resulted in an unprecedented polarisation in the Ethiopian society. This polarisation is dragging Ethiopia on a dangerous political course that is apt to precipitate and duplicate the unsightly ethnic carnage we have witnessed in Ruanda. Should we idly sit by when Ethiopia under the stewardship of EPRDF is degenerating into such a scenario ?*

=====////////=====

*N. B. - The enumerated footnotes used in this article have not been reproduced for lack of space.*

=====

*This is an article has been published in two parts in the Los Angeles-based Ethiopian Register monthly magazine August and October 1994 issues.*