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Chapter IX — Derailed Modernization: The Ethnonationalist Phase

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Chapter IX

Derailed Modernization: The Ethnonationalist Phase

The last chapter concluded with the generalized expectation that the fall of the Derg would set in motion some form of democratization dismantling the wide-ranging restrictions of the existing socialist system, even if there was uncertainty about the real political program of the victorious Tigrean insurgents. Despite promises of democratization, it did not take long for people to realize that Ethiopia was heading for yet another version of hegemonic rule, this one replacing the class ideology of the previous regime with ethnonationalism. As though a curse were on it, Ethiopia's modernization will once more stumble over an ideology and a political system framed for the implementation of a different brand of exclusionary politics.

The Ethnonationalist Turn

The term “ethnonationalism” characterizes political movements claiming to represent conquered or dominated “nations” defined in terms of inherited ethnic characteristics, such as common racial, tribal, cultural, or linguistic features. Since they speak in the name of dominated nations, their avowed goal is the right to self-determination, up to and including secession from an existing state. They differ from mere ethnic movements, which are political movements that fight for equal rights and treatment but fall short of being separatist. As such, ethnonationalism must be seen as a radicalizing ideology, that is, as an expression of political competition targeting the exclusion of rival elites through the formation of either a new and independent state or a state in which the group that claims to represent the dominated ethnic group controls absolute power.

As we saw in the last chapter, the Derg's complete eradication of rightwing and leftwing forces left no other alternative than the ethnicization of oppositions. The story of the Ethiopian leftist movement is well summarized if we say along with John W. Harbeson that it split into three “competing, yet overlapping, revolutionary movements,” namely, “(1) *military-led socialism* . . . (2) *civilian socialism* . . . (3) *separatist nationalism*.”¹ All three vied for power through radicalized ideologies until ethnonationalist movements came out on top following the Derg's elimination of the civilian left. In addition to showing a greater resistance against the repeated assaults of the Derg, ethnonationalist movements proved more extremist than Marxist radicalization, since they called most of the time for nothing less than the dismantling of Ethiopia. Insofar as the Amhara ethnic group was held responsible for the establishment of modern Ethiopia in which the Amhara elite, in addition to imposing its language and culture on the country, had full control of political power and economic resources at the expense of all other ethnic groups, nothing could better stigmatize both the Ethiopian state and Ethiopianism than the ethnonationalist ideology. By contrast, local ethnic identities were rehabilitated, idealized, and raised to the level of full-fledged nations. In so doing, ethnonationalism countered military socialism, Ethiopian nationalist forces,

and the Amhara elite's hegemonic position, thereby providing the alternative ideology that was needed to give a fighting chance to ethnicized regional elites in the struggle for power.

Unsurprisingly, many scholars, especially those belonging to Oromo, Tigrean, and Eritrean ethnic groups, defended the thesis that Amhara domination over other ethnic groups was the main cause of the Ethiopian Revolution. For ethnonationalist intellectuals, among the various cracks in the imperial regime, "the discontent of the colonized peoples . . . was the deepest fault line running through the society."² The term "colonized peoples" is deliberately coined to underscore the seriousness of the ethnic issue in Ethiopia and the legitimacy of the claim to self-determination and independence. Where there is colonization, decolonization becomes the overriding and the only legitimate goal, which means either the rebuilding of the Ethiopian state on a new basis or, ultimately, its dismantlement. In other words, the primary challenge that led the social uprisings against the imperial regime to a revolutionary denouement was ethnic discontents and regional separatist movements, the most important being the armed insurrections in Eritrea and in other parts of the country, like in the Somali region of Ethiopia.

Several decisive arguments can be made against the thesis that ethnic issues were the main cause of the Ethiopian Revolution. First, even though separatist movements erupted here and there during Haile Selassie's rule, none was really strong enough, including the Eritrean insurgency, to score meaningful military victories, still less to threaten the imperial regime. Because separatist movements were largely contained militarily and limited to remote and peripheral areas, their characterization as the main cause of the downfall of the imperial regime is an obvious exaggeration. More importantly, without the large and active participation of Amhara, who were dominant in all spheres of life, the Ethiopian Revolution would not have taken place. We can even say that it would not have occurred if the uprisings had taken a marked ethnonationalist direction. The beginning of the revolution unquestionably highlighted the prevalence of class consciousness and solidarity against the imperial system over ethnic exclusivism, given the fact that class exploitation was considered the overriding common enemy of all ethnic groups, including the Amhara working people. This prevalence is the reason why a great number of Amhara participated in the revolts against the monarchy and many of them even took the leadership of the civilian, student, and military movements. As Marina and David Ottaway write: during the early stages of the revolution "class conflicts cut across the country's main ethnic divisions."³

The evident prevalence of class alignment over ethnic divisions reasserts that deep dissatisfactions, as we saw in previous chapters, of urban and rural populations over conditions of life better account for the eruption of revolution. Before the fall of the monarchy and during the unfolding of the revolution, except for the Eritrean case, ethnic issues were either latent or inextricably fused with the Marxist-Leninist ideology. In fact, as the revolution was unfolding, the general belief was that ethnic inequality would find its final resolution with the establishment of socialism, which includes a provision sanctioning the right to self-determination of each ethnic group within the same political unit. The then Soviet Union was the inspiring model: by recognizing the sovereignty of each nationality over its own territory, the Soviet system, so it was believed, created the condition allowing the practice of self-determination within a freely accepted federal union. Moreover, it can be argued that the intensification of ethnic politics since the fall of Haile Selassie's regime is both an aspect and a consequence of the radicalization of Ethiopian students and intellectuals in the 60s and early 70s. The radical and polarizing culture inherited from the adoption of Marxism-Leninism has certainly eased the transition from class struggle to ethnonationalism. What could be more polarizing and destructive of the system inherited from the Amhara hegemonic rule than the principle defending the right to self-determination of conquered

and “colonized” peoples? Lastly, the defeat of the Ethiopian state at the hands of ethnonationalist insurgents proved the political and combative efficiency of ethnonationalist ideologies, as opposed to the failures of social uprisings based on class solidarity. Some such victory could not but considerably boost the attractiveness of ethnonationalist ideology: as the saying goes, the proof is in the pudding.

These arguments clearly state that ethnonationalism is essentially a post-revolutionary development. True, separatist movements existed before the revolution, but they were not mobilizing enough to constitute a threat. They could neither overshadow the commitment of most people to national unity nor militarily challenge the Ethiopian army. Even the insurgency in Eritrea was nowhere near representing a real threat to the imperial regime. Precisely, ethnonationalist movements were able to grow because of the Derg’s reckless policy: its appropriation of all power, its stubborn stand against the very idea of negotiation, its disastrous economic failure, its violent form of rule, and its inability (due to sheer incompetence) to prevail against guerrilla forces in Eritrea and Tigray frustrated and disappointed a large number of people among the military and civilian personnel, who then either turned into bystanders or tacitly supported or even frankly joined the ethnonationalist movements. Unsurprisingly, with defeat, came the discredit of Ethiopianism to the benefit of ethnonationalism.

The Nature of Ethnonationalism

The best way to unravel the politics involved in the ethnonationalist ideology is to review the debate over the nature of ethnonationalism. For one school of thought called primordialism, ethnonationalism is a primordial and emotional attachment to fixed group characteristics, such as blood ties, race, language, region, and custom. Because ethnic ties go deep into biological and affective motivations, primordialism concludes that they are “more basic and ‘primordial’ than social groups organized on the basis of class.”⁴ Such an attachment naturally longs for national sovereignty so that the only way to resolve ethnic conflicts is to allow people the right to live in the state of their choice, even by seceding from existing states.

Opposed to this line of thinking is the school of instrumentalism, which argues that ethnic conflict is less about attachment to primary identity and more about competition for the control of state power. The persistence of identity politics is thus better explained by social inequalities than by biological determinants, there being no doubt that enduring social discriminations can entail “the continued salience of racial and ethnic criteria.”⁵ Where structured social inequalities exist, excluding groups use certain characteristics (physical, linguistic, religious, etc.) to define and justify their hegemony, while excluded groups extol their own characteristics to enhance their respective internal solidarity and contest the hegemony. Far from being a primordial drive flowing from biological and psychological determinants, ethnicity is thus a product of social relations, and as such, is largely manufactured. Accordingly, identity politics is how elites from marginalized groups vie for state power and access to resources by mobilizing people in the name of their oppressed or marginalized ethnic identity. To quote Harvey Glickman, ethnicity is used as “a focal point for mobilization or competition over resources, be they within or outside the state apparatus, economic or political.”⁶ Since ethnic conflict is primarily about political competition rather than about exclusive cultural identifications, a political arrangement allowing decentralization and power-sharing can promote a peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The weakness of instrumentalism arises from the implied idea that ethnic identification is a product of elite manipulation, a conception that is obviously not enough to explain its strong

emotional content and its inclination for violent confrontations. Instrumentalism presents identity politics as a rational calculation, but does not explain why the masses follow with great fervor the calculation of elites. It is this weakness that the constructivist approach wants to correct by associating belligerent ethnic discourses with the invention of new identities. Constructivism argues that mistreatments and the need for liberation prepare the ground for marginalized elites to imagine communities embellished with thrilling characteristics, thereby successfully mobilizing the people with whom they identify. The promise of deliverance activates affective components that impart an emotional dimension to what is but an invented identity. Accordingly, constructivism “sees ethnicity as the product of human agency, a creative social act through which such commonalities as speech code, cultural practice, ecological adaptation, and political organization become woven into a consciousness of shared identity.”⁷ Far from being primordial, ethnicity is, therefore, a historical development and, as such, complex, fluid, and changing. Likewise, instead of being a mere rational calculation reviving a past identity, it brings into play an invented and idealized new identity. This idealized identity accounts for the emotional component of ethnonationalism.

The above debate solicits an approach that sees complementarity, rather than opposition, between constructivism and instrumentalism. Indeed, the mobilization of reinvented galvanizing identities suited for the purpose of empowerment, is it not the most effective way of promoting political and economic interests, especially when said interests are challenged or denied? In other words, cultural construction is itself an instrument whose purpose is to optimize a political claim. As one author puts it, ethnic groups are “calculating, self-interested collective actors, maximizing material values through the vehicle of communal identity.”⁸ Instead of a mere revival of primordial attachments, the combination of the two approaches offers the obvious advantage of being relevant to current problems and aspirations. The reinvention of identity puts at the disposal of elites fighting for the control of power the possibility of mobilizing powerful sentiments associated with identity and group solidarity, thereby mapping out constituencies that function as their power bases. Since the fight is over the control of the state, the strategy is to mobilize group rights so as to use reinvented ascriptive characteristics (common descent, language, culture, etc.) to exclude political rivals as unentitled, alien, or illegitimate opponents or rulers.

A good example of the insight provided by the combination of instrumentalism with constructivism is the case of the TPLF. Without interpreting ethnicity as an imaginative reinvention of identity, instrumentalism by itself cannot explain how the TPLF succeeded in taking the people of Tigray along the path of ethnonationalism. Though Tigray is considered the cradle of Ethiopian civilization and state and Tigreans and Amhara share important cultural traits and a long common history under the same national polity, the TPLF reinvented Tigray as a distinct nation by emphasizing language differences and by putting the blame for Tigray’s poverty and blockage of its purported high potentials on the Amhara political hegemony. The case of the TPLF thus confirms the involvement of an act of invention, but the explanatory power of the invention is not complete unless it is linked to a political goal, which provides the purpose of the creation of a new identity. This is exactly how Aregawi Berhe, a founding member of the TPLF and a former commander puts it: “The TPLF leadership put forward ethno-nationalism with ‘self-determination including and up to secession’ as its principal goal mainly because it offered the best chance of building an effective fighting force that leads to power, which understandably is the elite’s own goal.”⁹

To the extent that the military victory of the TPLF meant the ideological triumph of ethnonationalism, it naturally postulated a profound deconstruction of the Ethiopian state, the very

one that cleared the way for the implementation of a federal system comprising national state units exclusively defined in ethnic terms. Ethnicity as a maximizing factor in elites' struggle for the control of power finds a perfect confirmation in Ethiopia's experiment with ethnic federalism. Besides being imposed, Ethiopia's ethnic federalism is deliberately established to ensure the saliency of ethnic identity. Whereas other countries use federalism as a device to dilute the divisiveness of ethnicity so as to boost national unity, all the rules and constitutional provisions in Ethiopia tend to strengthen ethnic identity to the detriment of a unifying national identity. A perfect illustration of this is the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994. It opens with the following preamble: "We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia strongly committed, in full and free exercise of our right to self-determination, to building a political community."¹⁰ Contrast the opening with that of the US Constitution: though it is equally federal, it says, "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union."¹¹ The purpose of the American Constitution is to perfect a union that already exists and is acknowledged as such. Not so with the Ethiopian Constitution: it speaks of separate and sovereign entities that agree to build a political association as though the Ethiopian national state had no prior existence. By any measure, the opening statement is far removed from prioritizing unity, since the created political assemblage does not derive from the people as one body, but from the distinct and sealed ethnic units, which are therefore the truly sovereign and founding entities. Moreover, these sovereign entities commit to unity only under the condition that it serves their interests while they themselves have no obligations toward the larger unity. This is evidenced by the recognition of an absolute right to secede: Article 39 of the Constitution reads, "Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession."¹² The absoluteness of the right excludes any provision requiring the surrender of whole or part of their sovereignty as a condition of their membership in the larger community.

The reason why the TPLF gave absolute primacy to the ethnic criterion over national sovereignty is not hard to find. Both to mobilize the Tigrean people so as to overthrow the perceived dominance of the Amhara elite and to establish a federal system that favors it, the TPLF, as a representative of a minority ethnic group, had to fracture Ethiopia along ethnic lines, whose consequence is that the country appears as a collection of nations and nationalities. In addition to being suitable for a divide-and-rule strategy, this fracturing scheme confines local elites to regional concerns while giving the TPLF full control of the federal government, especially of its military and repressive forces. Such a system develops relationships with regional elites that are fundamentally unequal: the continued support of the TPLF is so essential to regional elites that they view themselves and act as junior partners. For they know that they have no entitlement to local power other than through the support of the party that installed them in power in the first place, namely, the TPLF. Any resistance on the part of regional elites entails the removal of their status, not to mention imprisonment and even loss of life. In vain does one point out that the constitution accords sovereignty to regional states: the bitter reality was that the absolute monopoly of violence and the unfettered control of the federal government made the TPLF the unrivaled dominant force. The paradox of all this is that the TPLF's total rule over the federal government, especially over its repressive apparatus, engendered a tightly controlled and centralized federal system. In short, the system was a federalism only in name, that is, a federalism in which the TPLF ruled by proxy over regional states.

Here, a parallel with the Derg is helpful to explain how the TPLF's control of state power, despite its federal form, surpassed even that of the Derg. We noted (see previous chapter) that the Derg first captured state power and then created a party to enhance its hegemony on all aspects of

social life. In this case, the party acted as an extension of state power, less so as its leader. Also, the posteriority of the party to the control of state power presented some handicaps, notably as concerns the ideological commitment of its members. Most members joined the party not so much to fulfill their revolutionary convictions as to advance their private interests. Accordingly, the Derg's party suffered from a noticeable deficiency in ideological rigor and enthusiasm in the implementation of its program. This deficiency, in turn, did not allow a complete subordination of the state to the party, and so could be viewed as one of the reasons for the defeat of the Derg. The trajectory of the TPLF took a reverse course in that the formation of the party preceded for many years the conquest of state power. The fact that the party was formed during the long and bloody struggle against the Derg meant that it was composed of members whose ideological commitment was battle-tested. In other words, since the party, unlike the case of the Derg, conquered the state, it acted as an uncontested overlord, not as an auxiliary to the state. In establishing its ascendancy over the state, not only did the anteriority entitle the party to shape independently the state in accordance with its ideological beliefs and power requirements, but it also enabled the TPLF to dictate and implement its program by means of a higher level of control over the state.

Modernization, Ethnicity, and Developmentalism

The fact that a group controlled absolute power by banning and eliminating other contending elites presages that the modernization of the country under the ethnonationalist banner was bound to face problems analogous to the previous regimes. Since the undivided domination of state power by one group is also how the group has exclusive access to economic resources, it puts modernization under conditions severely restricting its expansion. Speaking of the chronic impediment resulting from the restriction of accesses through an absolute stronghold over power, Christopher Clapham writes,

The culture of statehood in Ethiopia has long been—and remains—hierarchical and intolerant of dissent, and imposes limitations which are not only responsible for much of the conflict from which the country has suffered, but also constitute a significant barrier (of which more later) to the development enterprise itself.¹³

In theory, the TPLF's argument was that ethnic federalism installs the kind of democracy necessary both to liberate all ethnic groups from the Amhara hegemony and guarantee their equal treatment. This democratization, in turn, conditions economic growth: not only does it enable the conception and implementation of a development program that is fair and equal for all ethnic groups, but it also removes the ascriptive rights and privileges of one group over other groups, thereby ending the exploitative relations that are responsible for the persistence of poverty. Moreover, ethnic federalism enables the dominated ethnic groups to protect and develop their identity and culture, and so restores their self-respect together with their right to self-rule. The purpose of the creation of regional state units that are demarcated according to ethnic criteria is precisely to provide each ethnic group the autonomy it needs to carry out self-rule. In practice, however, the political supremacy of the TPLF and, with it, of the Tigrean elite—supremacy exercised through the control of the federal government—substantially reduced the promised autonomy by instituting a tightly centralized system that was, as mentioned above, federal only in name. Individual as well as group rights were crushed under the weight of the stark dominance of the TPLF.

In the face of this glaring and basic contradiction, the leaders of the TPLF came up with a proposal that would at least mitigate the contradiction. They offered a trade-off to the people of Ethiopia: in exchange for the TPLF's absolute stronghold on power, they promised a rapid economic development that would equally benefit all Ethiopians. To borrow Clapham's words, the conflict between the promise of equality and the political dominance of people from Tigray's region "imposed a need to seek 'performance legitimacy' through a project of economic transformation."¹⁴ The trade-off was announced through the official adoption of the policy of developmental state in 2006, the "implementation" of which predates its official announcement. The late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the main ideologue and leader of the TPLF, disclosed his advocacy for the theory of developmental state in a draft thesis titled "African Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings."

Before reviewing the content of the draft, let us examine the circumstances that led to the official adoption of the policy. The officialization came after the 2005 parliamentary election in which a coalition of opposing parties performed so well that it snatched all the seats in the capital Addis Ababa. The ruling party admitted its defeat in the capital, but claimed that it had the national majority vote necessary to form a government. The ensuing dispute led to a crackdown, the outcome of which was that opposition leaders were imprisoned and protesters gunned down. Since the election had revealed that the regime had lost whatever popularity and credibility it had, some new defense was needed to justify the continuation of the TPLF's hegemonic rule and its heightened recourse to repressive methods. The timing for the official adoption of the policy of developmental state is, therefore, expressive of the need "to take a swift change of strategy by forcefully pushing developmentalism. In doing so, the ruling party maintains not only its power but also its heavy hand on the economy."¹⁵ To the usual claim of protecting ethnic groups against unitarist and antifederalist forces, supposedly led by the Amhara elite, developmentalism added the justification of a strong and centralized state as a necessary condition for achieving the promised economic growth.

The irony of all this is that, even as repression was tightening, Prime Minister Meles argued for a developmental state that is also democratic. The draft thesis strongly criticizes the neoliberal model of development that most African countries follow, labeling it as "a dead end" and "incapable of bringing about the African renaissance."¹⁶ He also goes against the prevailing view according to which a developmental state is necessarily undemocratic. Not only does Meles contest the alleged incompatibility of developmental state with democracy, but he also maintains that "a democratic developmental state is ... likely to be even more effective as a developmental state than an undemocratic one," for the reason that its policy "would emerge from free debate and dialogue."¹⁷ How is one to explain this attempt to reconcile democracy with a theory known for making development conditional on the postponement of democracy, and this soon after the bloody crackdown of the opposition and the unmistakable shift toward a draconian repressive policy? No other response comes to mind except to say that the attempted reconciliation was just a smoke screen, all the more so as the case of such countries as Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and China underlines that the distinctive premise of a developmental state is to maintain that "democratic reform is only to be undertaken after some degree of economic development."¹⁸ Thus, according to the unaltered version of the developmental state, democracy is an upshot of development, not one of its prerequisites.

The need for a smoke screen fully stands out when one sees that the unusual intention of "combining the notion of developmental state with democracy shows the dilemma of the incumbent regime and its desire to fit with the need of the pro-west-international system and not

to lose the support of donor agencies.”¹⁹ Seeing the tightening of repression after the 2005 election, the explanation according to which democracy is added for the purpose of reassuring Western donors rather than for actual implementation is quite plausible. Nevertheless, the explanation cannot be complete unless an internal need is appended to the external one. Meles has always maintained that democracy is not so much a matter of choice for Ethiopia as a necessity for its survival as a united country. Of course, when he says so, he is but reiterating the reason for the partition of the country along ethnic lines, which remains the cornerstone of the TPLF’s self-appointed championship of the cause of ethnic groups. The establishment of an ethnic-based federalism was precisely an arrangement designed to overcome ethnic conflicts by allowing each ethnic group to govern itself within a clearly demarcated ethnic zone. There should not be any doubt that Meles considered the arrangement as a democratic solution. He believed so because, in his mind, the term “democracy” carries a meaning that does not exactly correspond to its Western understanding. The democracy of Meles is primarily a revolutionary rather than a liberal democracy; as such, it gives primacy to the assertion and defense of group rights. Put in other words, his revolutionary democracy subordinates the protection of individual rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms to group rights. In his eyes, the federal system is democratic, not because it protects individual rights, but primarily because it grants self-rule to ethnic groups.

Be it noted that the distinction between revolutionary democracy and liberal democracy goes back to the TPLF’s Marxist-Leninist origins, that is, to the difference between bourgeois democracy and people’s democracy. Whereas the emphasis on a form of representative government that protects individual rights and arises from universal suffrage based on free and fair electoral competitions between political parties defines liberal democracy, people’s democracy uses revolutionary means to empower the common interests and rights of the working people. This means that it argues for the supremacy and priority of the collective rights of the working people over individual freedom and political pluralism, the very ones that privilege diversity of interests over the homogeneity of collective or group interests. The primacy of the collective is how the fundamental goal of people’s democracy, namely, equality, is achieved. Summarizing the application of the principles of revolutionary democracy, one analyst writes: since

the unique political quest in Ethiopia was quest for political rights of nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia, the political system has to be designed to address this quest. Hence, there needs to address group rights first, which once addressed, could be possible to exercise liberal democracy. Revolutionary democracy also emphasizes the need for a strong leading party that works for those political goals.²⁰

The revolutionary policy of focusing on group rights rather than on individual rights manifests itself through economic dirigisme geared toward the satisfaction of the collective needs of ethnic groups. True, this state dirigisme allows the operation of a private sector, but only in its capacity to assist the state’s overall developmental plan and implementation. The lesson from the failure of socialist nationalizations is that the state needs the private sector to achieve its economic goals. Consequently, the strategy of developmental state does not consider private property as a sacred right (lands remain nationalized in Ethiopia); it permits the operation of a private sector on condition that the market and the major branches of economic operations remain under the strict control of the state. Such a restriction makes sure that every economic activity is subordinated to the needs of the developmental state. In theory, this subordination is none other than a translation in economic terms of the ascendancy of group rights over individual rights.

As concerns political rights, we find the same revolutionary restrictions. Democracy under the developmental state is not defined by distinct political parties with different social programs vying for state power in free and fair elections. Nor are different branches of government empowered to keep each other in check. Just as different governmental branches are reduced to being merely auxiliaries of the executive power, so too political freedom must not be allowed to defy revolutionary democracy. There cannot be any limitation to the absolute authority of the ruling party and its state, since limitation would hamper its abilities to implement its revolutionary program. We have here a revamp of the Soviet model, but with the difference that the version of Meles does not go to the extent of banning opposition political parties. It allows them to operate, but under restricted conditions that practically erase their ability to become serious contenders. Justifying these restrictions is the reasoning that the developmental state requires that democracy be monitored by “a dominant party or dominant coalition democracy.”²¹ The coalition itself must not be a mere collection of different parties, for it cannot be strong and united unless a vanguard party leads the coalition itself, the other name for this practice being democratic centralism. Stated otherwise, it is not a one-party system; it is a system based on a coalition of parties representing ethnic groups and headed by one dominant party, which is, of course, the TPLF. Describing the operation of a system combining two contradictory attributes, namely, democracy and centralism, Theodore M. Vestal writes, “Each member ‘national’ organization has its own parallel leadership structure, but following the principles of ‘democratic centralism,’ command of the ethnic fronts effectively remains with the leadership of the EPRDF, which is dominated by the TPLF.”²²

Now if we ask the question of knowing why the system does not go all the way to become a one-party system, several answers are advanced. As we said earlier, there is the need to retain Western financial, economic, and diplomatic support. In addition to being indispensable to obtain Western investments and donations, the existence of opposition parties is a safety valve to reduce social tensions by opening outlets for the venting of grievances. Also, there is the fact that the system would fail to be “democratic” in the sense of representing various distinct groups if it operated as a one-party system. Another, already mentioned, reason is that a coalition of parties under one dominant party fulfills the developmental state’s requirement of “a strong state,” while remaining “democratic” in the revolutionary sense of the word.²³ Only as a strong and centralized system of power can the state efficiently intervene and implement the program of the dominant party. Likewise, in being strong, it becomes able to rise above the interests of individuals and particular groups, and this gives it the backbone to fight rent-seeking. This fight is all the more necessary as this method of enriching oneself without creating any wealth is a particular threat to an economy in which the state retains an extensive dirigiste role. State dirigisme opens the door for the abuse of power and for all kinds of harmful practices, such as corruption, embezzlement, nepotism, and fraud. In order to prevent these harmful practices, the state must be strong enough to discipline and sanction its own agents, and this requires the permanent surveillance and punitive capacity of a dominant party. Lastly, in staying strong, the state can marginalize and weaken opposition parties, and thus succeed in achieving a stable and lasting government necessary for the realization of developmental goals.

Choice or Necessity?

Before reviewing the outcomes of the combination of ethnic federalism with the theory of developmental state, one lingering question must be answered, which is whether ethnic federalism was adopted because it was necessary or whether it was a choice among other possible alternatives.

As far as the TPLF is concerned, there is not an iota of doubt that necessity dictated the policy. Its argument is that, by the time of the complete collapse of the state after the defeat of the Derg, ethnic hostilities had become so severe that Ethiopia could not have avoided the eruption of civil war without the establishment of ethnic federalism. In thus taking up the mantle of savior, not only is the TPLF providing a self-serving justification, but it is also giving a description that is not reflective of the situation of Ethiopia at the time of the collapse of the Derg. The allegation that Ethiopia was on the verge of a civil war overlooks the fact that most people welcomed the victorious Tigrean troops because they considered the riddance of the Derg as a deliverance. This proves that the hostility was against the Derg rather than among ethnic groups. It also ignores the fact that during the early days of the TPLF's takeover, nothing that came close to an uprising, chaotic situation, or ethnic clashes of any importance occurred. If anything, this ascertains that the present state of hostility among ethnic groups does not so much predate the TPLF's takeover as derives from it. Indeed, we have already indicated that the TPLF, as a representative of a minority ethnic group, could not hope to retain its hegemonic position without a strategy of divide and rule, and this meant primarily sowing discord between ethnic groups, especially between the two major groups, to wit, the Amhara and Oromo.

Even if we go along with the idea that some form of federation privileging group identity was necessary, the way the TPLF conceived and implemented ethnic federalism is far from confirming the alleged lack of other alternatives. Here, a brief digression is in order. Countries like India, Switzerland, Canada, and Belgium are cited as living examples of integration of ethnicity with the requirements of national unity. While Canada and Belgium are referred to as examples of national integration with lingering issues, Switzerland and India are praised for their successful merger of unity with diversity. By contrast, the former Soviet Union, which had accorded, as is now the case in Ethiopia, to every republic in the union "the right freely to secede from the U.S.S.R" is presented as the model of failed integration.²⁴ Hence the fear of many Ethiopians that the inclusion of the right to secede in the constitution will put Ethiopia on the same path of disintegration as the Soviet Union.

In view of the difficulties of Ethiopia, a short parallel between the two successful cases and Ethiopian ethnic federalism is liable to show whether the path taken by the TPLF was the only way out even if one concedes that the politicization of ethnicity was unavoidable. Obviously, the burning question here is the question of knowing how Switzerland and India successfully accomplished the miracle of marrying diversity with unity. To begin with India, serious studies attribute the Indian success to the early commitment to both unity and diversity of the Indian National Congress Party. In its slow move toward independence, the party, which was mostly composed of Indian elites and educated middle-class citizens, did not harbor the project of homogenizing India's linguistic and religious diversity. Speaking of the policy of the party, one scholar writes: from the start, "the Congress's sense of nationalism revolves around the embracement of a pluralistic diversity (language, religion, ethnicity, culture), rather than projecting a monolithic India or a homogeneous identity."²⁵ In embracing India's pluralism, the Congress was just extending its own internal composition, namely, the fact that it "incorporates people from diverse ethnic, economic, gender, ideological and religious backgrounds."²⁶ Because it is itself multi-ethnic while remaining united, the party came "to be regarded as an 'umbrella party.'"²⁷ The consensus is that the existence and rise to power of such a diverse and united party greatly contributed to the minimization of the polarizing tendency of ethnic identities. As a result, instead of being divisive, ethnic diversity became the basis of the democratic management of ethnic and other issues, thereby laying the ground for the establishment of a democratic political system.

As to Switzerland, a development akin to India took place resulting in the formation of “a highly stable, secure, and functioning” multiethnic nation-state.²⁸ Based on the principle of elite accommodation, the Swiss federal system functions according to the rule of power sharing between the national government and the cantons, a practice granting extensive local autonomy to the latter. This large autonomy furnishes the basis for the recognition and promotion of Swiss diversity through the establishment of linguistic regions. The question that comes to mind is how Switzerland was able to harmonize national identity with linguistic and cultural diversity. According to the prevailing view, the emergence of a transethnic elite, which emergence seriously hindered the rise of single language-based parties of any significance, was a major contributing factor. As one observer writes, “in Switzerland, in contrast to what is happening in Canada, Spain or Belgium, no major political party is organized on a regional or language basis.”²⁹ The regional parties that appeared here and there have so far significantly failed to acquire the wide importance that the big multiethnic parties have. This contrast does validate the view that the sustained prevalence of multiethnic parties explains the Swiss success. For example, the difficulty that Canada faces despite the grant of large autonomy to the province of Quebec can be attributed to the presence of a strong regional party like the Parti Québécois.

The common feature that accounts for the success of integration in India and Switzerland is clearly the emergence of influential multiethnic elites committed to both national unity and ethnic diversity. In both cases, rather than assembling disparate groups into an aggregate whole that could hardly avoid the impression of being an artificial gathering, the recognition of diversity went from unity to pluralism, and so took the form of a democratic decentralization or differentiation within the same unit. The formation of strong multiethnic parties that worked toward the tempering of the divisiveness of identity politics and used democratic principles as the best and only method to peacefully manage pluralism made the fusion of unity and diversity possible.

Worth considering here is that the rise of a transethnic elite became almost a reality in the Ethiopian student movement and in the two parties derived from the movement, namely, the EPRP and the MEISON. It is known that both parties were not only supportive of national unity while being quite taken by the necessity of recognizing and defending Ethiopia’s ethnic diversity, but they were also multiethnic in the composition of their members. Unfortunately, the uncompromising and undemocratic Leninist ideology that both parties followed, their bloody and mutually weakening fight against each other, and their defeat by a unitary and despotic military ruling clique thwarted their development into a full-blown, united, and winning transethnic party. Their decline and subsequent insignificance opened the door for the proliferation of ethnicized elites. With the defeat of the Derg under the combined assaults of Eritrean and Tigrean ethnonationalist armed forces, a new political phase began that took pride in dismantling unity so as to liberate and promote, so the TPLF claimed, the suppressed and abused ethnic groups of Ethiopia. In other words, the importance that ethnic politics has acquired in today’s Ethiopia is an elite-made phenomenon subsequent to conditions frustrating the consolidation of transethnic Ethiopian elites. As constructivism argues, in Ethiopia like anywhere else, ethnic animosity is a construct arising from definite social conditions, not a natural trait.

Lastly, if one wants to know why the TPLF, as the main force and organizer of the ethnic fragmentation, took the path of constituting the Ethiopian state via the gathering of ethnic groups rather than the opposite direction of moving from unity to diversity, as did India and Switzerland, there is only one possible answer. As a representative of a minority ethnic group with the goal of achieving full hegemonic control of the country, the TPLF knew, as said previously, that the

promotion of a transethnic elite would not provide it with the proper place to accomplish its goal. Notably, the importance of Amhara and Oromo elites had to be neutralized through a sustained policy of divide and rule. Once division is championed as the chosen method to achieve hegemony, unity becomes the enemy. As whatever unites elites is contrary to the interest of the TPLF, it naturally turned its back on any project supporting the constitution of a strong and organized transethnic elite. This explains the formation, not of a united ruling party, but of the EPRDF, which was a coalition of distinct parties under the dominant control of the TPLF. By maintaining the ethnic cleavages within itself, the ruling party deliberately deprived itself of the possibility of evolving into a pan-Ethiopian party. This lack of a strong transethnic political party consecrated the TPLF as the overlord of the coalition while the representatives of the major ethnic groups were at each other's throats.

Assessment and Outcomes

The results of the developmental state, as conceived and implemented by Meles and his successors after his death, are, according to many scholars, a very mixed bag. On the one hand, a scholar like Clapham speaks of a startling economic performance, since “over the period from 2000 to 2013,” Ethiopia achieved “a gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 9.5% a year.”³⁰ International organizations, like the World Bank and United Nations Development Program, have provided statistics matching Clapham's numbers. On the other hand, many scholars underline that this economic performance came with severe downsides. Besides the special privileges enjoyed by senior members of the TPLF and Tigrean elites in general, the most obvious downside is the “colossal gap between the rich and the poor” as well as between “urban and rural areas.”³¹ This scandalous disparity paints a clear picture: excluded from economic growth, the great majority of the people remained stuck in poverty, while a tiny minority, who mostly operated in cahoots with officials of the ruling party, exorbitantly enriched itself. Among the drawbacks, we also find such negative outcomes as a critical foreign currency shortage, an acute trade deficit, rampant corruption, a soaring inflation rate, and a crushing foreign debt. If one adds to all this the cost to freedom of a heavy-handed interventionist government, one fairly wonders whether the trade-off of economic improvement for absolute power was not a fool's bargain. Seeing the disastrous impact of these negative fallouts on the conditions of life of ordinary people, it is baffling to read here and there high praises for the economic performance of the regime. All the more reason for saying so is that the majority of Ethiopian people did not agree with the praises, since their frustration caused a nationwide political crisis that translated into sustained protests against the government in various parts of the country. The attempts of the government to violently quell the protests repeatedly failed. On April 2, 2018, the election of a new prime minister of Oromo origin, Abiy Ahmed, ended the hegemony of the TPLF.

The inability of economic growth to reach ordinary people exposes the lack of factors that are decisive for the success of the model of developmental state. Thus, for many scholars, an important missing piece was the development of “meritocratic and autonomous bureaucracy.”³² Not only did the Ethiopian system favor the promotion of members of the ruling party in the bureaucracy and other positions of responsibility, but also those promoted did not have the proper academic and professional skills, not to mention their questionable moral caliber. True, the regime encouraged the opening of schools and universities in various places, but the quality of education given at various levels of the educational establishment was alarmingly low in terms of qualified teaching staff, students' aptitudes and readiness, and adequate infrastructure. As to the autonomy

of the bureaucracy, the regime completely ignored that the success of the developmental state greatly depends on professional bureaucrats directing and supervising the economy rather than the cadre of the ruling party. The consequence is that the criterion of political and personal loyalty single-handedly determined ministerial, managerial, and bureaucratic appointments to the detriment of merit, skill, and professionalism. The extensive use of the criterion directly contradicted the developmental state's rejection of clientelism and its express advocacy of efficiency and professionalism in exchange for handsome remunerations. All the drawbacks previously mentioned, the privileging of Tigrean elites, rampant corruption, soaring inflation, heavy foreign debt, scandalous enrichment of the few at the expense of the many, etc., are all caused, directly or indirectly, by the predominant role given to a highly politicized bureaucracy devoid of the qualities required to implement the strategy of developmental state, like professionalism, merit-based appointment, efficiency, and dedication to national development rather than to the interests of ethnonationalist political elites.

More needs to be said about loyalty because it provides one of the keys to the question of knowing why the TPLF, despite the appearance of firm control over the country, collapsed in a short time. Though at the time of its capture of power, the TPLF looked united, ideologically well-grounded, and benefited from a competent leadership, as years passed, its ideological rigor diminished and its members, especially those in leadership positions, appeared more interested in amassing wealth by any means, including corruption, embezzlement, and other kinds of illegal practices, while also engaging in internal disputes through the formation of factions. At the same time, the collective leadership of the party was weakening and inexorably leaning toward the ascendancy of one of its leaders, to wit, Meles, who was Chairman of the party and Prime Minister since 1995. The unstoppable evolution of the party toward the unchallenged rule of one man made a significant leap in 1998 when an extremely bloody war against Eritrea over border disputes broke out. The war lasted almost two years and ended with a peace agreement that failed to appease the existing hostility for the reason that Meles refused to implement a major clause of the agreement. Notably, he rejected the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague awarding the contested area of Badme to Eritrea.

The conduct of the war and the terms of the agreement heightened divisions within the TPLF and resulted in the expulsion of 12 important members from the Central Committee. This expulsion enabled Meles to tighten his control over the party and place his most loyal followers in various crucial positions. The fact that loyalty to Meles became the overriding criterion meant the demotion of other criteria, like merit, professionalism, and ideological commitment, and this in conjunction with Meles closing his eyes to, if not secretly encouraging, all sorts of corrupt practices. In consequence, by the time Meles became ill and died in 2012, the party was in a shamble. It suffered from internal divisions, generalized corruption of its highest members, and declining ideological dedication, not to mention the background of a mounting popular disillusionment over its failed policies. In the face of these simmering crises, one would expect that the party would try to reform itself. Though there were talks of reform, nothing of the kind happened: the party was paralyzed by internal divisions, incompetence, and willful ignorance of the coming danger. This is to say that all the qualities that the party had developed during its long struggle against the Derg were sacrificed to ensure the absolute power of Meles, a too familiar trend of Ethiopian politics, the very one that also incapacitated the imperial regime and the Derg.

In addition to the general weakening of the party and the deficiency of professionalism in all sectors of social life, the other reason for the failure of the TPLF is the lack of a vision uniting the country. In a social context defined by the absence of a "unifying ideology," owing to the

prevalence of ethnic identity that the government purposely encouraged and cemented by the establishment of ethnic federalism, the implementation of the strategy of developmental state is hardly an achievable project.³³ It becomes an impossible project when, in addition to the absence of a unifying vision, the implementing party is divided, as was the case after the death of Meles. Where national identity has been weakened, nay discredited, rivalries between ethnic groups and the subsequent use of the ethnic criterion to access power and wealth undermine fair competitive conducts at all levels of social life. Similarly, the commitment to ethnic identity goes against the very goal of a strong national state and privileges regional interests. It thus prevents a genuine application of the theory of developmental state, which necessitates, as we saw, a strong and authoritarian state, that is, a state that enjoys financial autonomy, is free of internal cleavages and frictions, and is not threatened by a strong opposition. The imperative of a strong state also means a state equipped with effective institutions so that it can soar above particular social forces. Only thus can it direct economic forces toward national development and have enough leverage to prevail over adverse and corrupting forces.

The other missing requirement of the development state model is “a partnership between a strong government and a strong private sector.”³⁴ In Ethiopia, because the private sector is very weak, the main agent of the development effort remains the state, and this can only adversely affect the goal of a successful outcome. Rather than the practice of partnership with the private sector, what we had in Ethiopia was to a large extent a state-driven economy. Moreover, the ascendancy of the state had been deliberately skewed in favor of the dominant party, since conglomerates that have close ethnic and political ties with those holding the rein of power were given absolute priority and preferential treatment. Thus, METEC (Metals and Engineering Corporation) and EFFORT (Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray), to name but the most important ones, dominated the market. Directly managed by senior members of the party, these TPLF-owned conglomerates extended their activities in numerous and crucial agricultural and industrial productions as well as in service areas, such as banking, insurance, and import/export. There is no denying that the provision of political support to these TPLF-controlled businesses structurally distorted the free operation of the market. The distortion encouraged the wide practice of corruption and embezzlement, given that enterprises owned by businesspersons who are not ethnically related or politically affiliated to the ruling Tigrean elite cannot hope to do business without bribing officials of the regime.

Exposing the faulty implementations of the strategy of developmental state does no more than reconfirm that the strategy was used not so much for the expected economic benefits as for its political gains. The proof of this is that nothing was being done to correct the flaws, even after they were openly acknowledged, as mentioned earlier, both during Meles’s rule and after his death. The political benefits protrude when we recall that the official adoption of the developmental state model occurred after the 2005 election’s results ascertained that opposition forces scored well. To the extent that the developmental state calls for a dominant party, it could be used to weaken opposition forces without having recourse to the internationally condemned one-party system. What is more, the distorted use of the model of development assigns a major economic role to the state and allows it to control immense resources, thereby laying the foundation of a neopatrimonial state, that is, a state pervaded with patron-client networks. Since such networks privilege the leader and his party, they are well suited for the hegemonic needs of Meles and his party. In maintaining followers and supporters in a dependent position, the system ensured their loyalty.

This loyalty, in turn, substituted for the missing crucial component of developmental state, namely, national unity. Having deliberately fragmented Ethiopia along ethnic lines for the

implementation of a divide-and-rule strategy—the only way by which a minority ethnic group can have and retain an upper hand—the allocation of rewards for loyalty to Meles and his party became the only incentive to lessen the fragmented state of ethnicized elites. Unbelievable as it may seem, instead of basing national unity on shared history, acquired common features, and the willingness to partake in a promising common future, Meles and his party sought to replace these standard binding ties of nation-building with an interest-driven agreement between ethnicized elites under the unrivaled ascendancy of the TPLF, to which, naturally, goes the lion's share in the access to opportunities and appropriation of resources. Contrasting the success of East Asia developmental states with the failure of the Ethiopian version, Francis Fukuyama notes that “they [East Asian countries] already had state systems and identities that could then be the basis for economic takeoff. This, obviously, is not the situation of Ethiopia, where national identity is very contested.”³⁵ The intention of implementing the theory of developmental state in a social context where national identity is deliberately undermined by the promotion of ethnicity was a contradiction in terms from the start. It makes sense only when the deceptive intent of using a promising theory of development for the purpose of justifying and reinforcing a hegemonic political project is brought to light.

To conclude, all those factors that strengthen the autonomy of individuals and institutions, such as merit-based social mobility, a vibrant private sector, an autonomous and depoliticized bureaucracy, and a unifying national identity, have been stifled in favor of an ethnicized state that controls everything. Once again, the compulsion to justify and consolidate a hegemonic system of power hijacked the modernization of Ethiopia. Indeed, Haile Selassie used selectively, as we saw, modernization to build an imperial autocracy; Mengistu destroyed the civilian left and decapitated Ethiopian institutions to achieve the absolute power deemed necessary to build socialism; Meles fragmented Ethiopia along ethnic lines to establish the supremacy of one dominant ethnic party. In all these cases, the victim is the proven propitious policy of power-sharing and democratic inclusiveness. The wrong-headed intent of monopolizing power led to the same vicious circle in each of these cases: the obsession with absolute power hinders modernization, which hindrance intensifies the need for the absolute control of the state as a *sine qua non* for the grabbing of resources rendered scarce by the self-serving misuses of modernization measures.

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