

The Polemics and Politics of Ethiopia's Disintegration

Disintegration, or more precisely secession, has been one of the most uninterruptedly recycled themes in the modern political history of Ethiopia. Different political groups, with vested interests in the country, used, redefined, and channeled it through various ways under different circumstances. In the post-monarchical Ethiopia, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and others went to the extent of taking up arms for what they believed was in the best interests of the people whom they supposedly represent. Bear with me, I have not forgotten, and thus, ruled out Eritrea from this brainstorming exercise. The case of Eritrea can, and definitely, serve a very salient purpose shortly.

From the outset, their claims were crystal-clear: a marked dissatisfaction with the existing political order in Ethiopia, and due to which, they opted for independence. Before proceeding further, however, let us raise some important questions worth asking here: Was it, and still is, a question of *sine qua non* importance in Ethiopia? Can historical, geographical, sociological, economic, and political infrastructures vouch for it? Can we make a relatively weighty distinction between the rhetorical, polemical or strategic deployment of "disintegration" or secession and its actuality on the ground as in the case with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) or today's PFDJ of Eritrea? The following paragraphs provide a preliminary engagement with these questions.

The Pretexts of Disintegration

Ethiopia as a country of multiple identities is a recent phenomenon. Historically, different political groups, hailing from the different parts of today's Ethiopia, attempted to create a strong political unit in-and-around today's Ethiopia. Of the many expansionist and "unifying" projects of various political leaders, the experiences of the Imam Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, Tewodros II, and Menelik II are particularly relevant. While Al-Ghazi's venture in the sixteenth century often portrayed, among conservative Christians and historians of Christianity and the Christian state in Ethiopia, as destructive and nothing short of foreign invasion, Tewodros and Menelik were generously appraised as torchbearers of the much-needed unity, modernity, and, most importantly, as the architects of today's Ethiopia.

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Although religion and economic interests (fertile land, human labor, etc) largely explain much of the political activities in Ethiopian history, political domination in many ways went along with ethnolinguistic pursuits. In other words, the Tigray and Amhara have been the emperors and rulers of Ethiopia for centuries, up until the Derg military junta took over power in 1974. Now, from Menelik II all the way through Haile Selassie I, the Amhara generally ruled the country. In spite of elevating the status of Ethiopia in Africa and the world (the victory of Adowa against the Italians was achieved through the mobilization of different ethnic groups under Menelik II; Haile Selassie I contributed significantly to the formation of the African Union; and etc), the period sowed the seeds of much of today's chaotic sociocultural, economic, and political conditions and uncertainties in the country. Simply put, this period, in many ways, had shaped the future of the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. Among other things, it was in this period that movements like the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) discovered their sense of being, causes, and aspirations. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) also adopted relatively the same path.

The Eritrean political movement against the Ethiopian establishment was much older than the TPLF. The movement started with a bitter dissatisfaction with the Ethiopian ethnoreligious political order. Although some trace the genealogy of the much earlier Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) to a political sidelining, religious-based discrimination, and oppression before Haile Selassie I, a direct confrontation seemed to start with Hamid Idris Awate's first fired shot against the Imperial force of Haile Selassie I in 1961. [1] Apart from religion and the forceful imposition of language, the last emperor's negation of the then UN resolution of Ethio-Eritrea federation and "re-integrating" Eritrea through occupation apparently strengthened the ideological and sentimental convictions of the ELF and later the EPLF. [2] In short, EPLF managed to get

the independence of Eritrea through a referendum in the 1990s. The case with TPLF, however, is something different in a number of ways.

The TPLF movement, unlike the EPLF of Eritrea, traces the origin of its discontents to the time elapsed between the death of Yohannes IV (Tigrayan Emperor of Ethiopia, 1872-1889) and the Derg regime (1974-1991). In the years between these historical periods, TPLF's political manifesto clearly mentions the peripheralization and marginalization of the Tigray ethnoreligious group under Amhara "domination." Aregawi Berhe, then "hard-core nationalist" and one of the seven founders of TPLF (although he left TPLF after Legesse Zenawi and his affiliates came to dominate TPLF), argued that TPLF's secessionist movement like "any other nationalist movement would also have considered such a direction if it had had to endure Menelik, Haile Selassie, and Mengistu's ethnic cleansing." [3] Haile Selassie I, in collaboration with the British Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1943, for instance, massacred "thousands of defenseless civilians" in Tigray (Mekelle) who, out of desperation, revolted ('Woyane') against his rule. [4] In addition to bombarding the people, he then went on to introducing heavy taxation system, snatched the locally based political power "in the name of centralization," land was confiscated, etc.[5]

The manifesto notes exploitations and oppressions in many directions, among others, in such issues as self-rule, language use, and the recurrence of drought and famine. [6] Aregawi Berhe claimed that the people of Tigray often experienced a certain degree disparagement, belittlement, and disdain during the Haile Selassie regime. Many people of Tigray ethnic background were forced to flee Tigray, due to Haile Selassie's harsh treatment, the recurrence of drought, and famine in the northern part of Ethiopia, and relocate and work in places where they were hired as blue color workers and manual laborers, especially in-and-around Addis Ababa. According to him, this had earned them "derogatory names." [7] These conditions, therefore, cumulatively paved the way for calling for the "Independent Republic of Tigray" as clearly spelled out in the original TPLF's manifesto. [8] Even though the idea of "Tigray republic" has been replaced by "self-determination" with the possibility of secession under TPLF's vexed constitution (article 39), the old idea of secession remains vital among TPLF's elites and social media activists.[9]

The Oromo Liberation movement (OLF), perhaps one of the world's long-running insurgent groups, fought for an independent Oromia. Unlike TPLF, the narrative underpinning of OLF was based on the assumption that the "Abyssinians colonized" the rest of Ethiopia, especially the people of Oromo, culture, and land.[10] Here, the "Abyssinians" refers to the people/leaders of Tigray and Amhara. It follows, therefore, that the movement's view of Ethiopia was expressed through its rebellion against the "thousands of years" old political leadership and history of Ethiopia. The oppression, exploitation, and denigration of the people of Oromo informed OLF's long-carried out armed struggle. Similarly, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) fought against what it considered ethnoreligious domination, oppression, and injustice in Ethiopia. ONLF sought the secession of Ethiopia's Somali region, also called Ogaden, in Eastern Ethiopia. [11]

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As of 2018, however, OLF and ONLF officially made it clear that they will no longer employ arms and dropped their bid for secession. Ethiopia's current Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, and his close associates brought about important changes new to the modern political history of Ethiopia. [12] This was a result of unflinching mass protest and the internal decaying of the TPLF dominated Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Since taking office in April 2018, Ethiopia saw many transformative steps taken at many levels, which were not even theoretically possible under the last 27 years of TPLF led totalitarian rule in the country. Of the many bold reformative actions, the prime minister's offer of reconciliation and collaboration with all opposition groups in-and-out of Ethiopia clearly stand out. Welcoming the offer, many political groups, armed or not, started negotiating with the government. This, among other things, proved meaningful and trustworthy, especially for OLF and ONLF, to make them rethink their means of achieving their political ends. [13] Finally, all armed groups, including Ginbot Seven, OLF, and ONLF, agreed to move from arms-based struggle to peaceful political struggle. It is, however, far from clear whether TPLF as a political figurehead of the Tigray ethnic group whole-heartedly moved from its initial position, regardless of the feasibility of its intentions in the Horn of Africa.

Interrogating Secessionist Politics in Ethiopia

Even though the discourses of “secession” and “independence” of ethnic groups as independent nation-states largely serve as polemical and rhetorical devices, it is far from being doable and favorable on many grounds. One may need to examine some four major factors that, in one way or another, determine this grand and attractive project but that does not appear, in light of a closer scrutiny, to have been clearly well-thought-out. Unless it is, of course, meant to serve as a rhetorical or polemical strategy to other ends, socio-economic and political justice and self-rule under the larger Ethiopia.

The first important factor would be the difficulty geography poses. Now, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to carve out nation states out of Ethiopia in its current geographical makeup. Imagine the making of the “Tigray Republic” and the state of Oromia! Geographical boundary (*yedenber yegebagnal teyaqewoch*) problems, even as regional states within Ethiopia, have always been the causes for the death of thousands, if not in millions, of citizens along Tigray-Amhara and Oromia-Somali regional states’ “borders” for decades. Furthermore, the Tigray regional state, unlike any other parts of Ethiopia, has been known for mass starvation, food insecurity, and drought *for centuries*. This applies, to a larger extent, to the Amhara regional state as well. Historically, one of the important factors in the internal migration of citizens, especially from the Northern end of Ethiopia to the rest of Ethiopia, has been conditioned-and-due to these recurrent problems.

The second critical factor is related to the demographic and cultural constitution of these societies in Ethiopia. Ethiopia, being one of the oldest states in the world, there has always been crossbreeding between different ethnic and cultural groups. Due to this, there are many “borderline societies” that cut across existing regional states’ geographical borders, and as such, it will ultimately pose fundamental problems. No need to go anywhere to showcase this. The Horn of Africa has ample experiences; almost all states in the region have the “problem” of “borderline societies”.

TPLF and OLF could learn many things from the experiences of Somalia

The third important factor has a lot to do with the political economy and geopolitics of Ethiopia and the Horn. Many of the rural societies of Ethiopia are either largely agriculturalists, agro-pastoralists, or pastoralists. The Ethiopian economy, no matter whether it has been registering an unprecedented economic growth for the last two or three decades or not, is one of the poorest in the world. Notwithstanding this, it has benefited from the diversity of economic activities in the different parts of Ethiopia. In other words, if the complementarity of economic activities fueled the Ethiopia economy, and conversely, if it fails to develop out of its misery through the amalgamation of different economic activities coming from the different parts of Ethiopia, one can hardly miss what would happen if Ethiopia were to decompose into tiny states with fragmented economic basis or specialization. In geopolitical terms, the political elites of TPLF have been, for many years, at odds with the Amhara down in the South and the EPLF of Eritrea up in the north. Other related issues in this regard include regional security issues, access to ports, military capacity, and others remain as very important factors as the four addressed here-the fourth factor follows next.

Finally, the idea and practice of secession have been attractive for many states and “would-be” states in the Horn of Africa. However, there seem(s) to be no model state(s) succeeded in building economically strong and political viable society(ies) in the Horn of Africa. TPLF and OLF could learn many things from the experiences of Somalia in the eastern corners of the Horn of Africa, Eritrea in the North of Ethiopia, and South Sudan in the North West of Ethiopia. Arguably, except for some form of “nominal” freedom (assuming freedom encompasses many issues), none of them has achieved any reasonable success by seceding from their closely aligned societies, at least economically and politically. This is particularly the case with Eritrea and South Sudan. In fact, for these and other reasons, many named these states as failed or fragile states. [14] A closely related issue with this last factor would be the challenge of devolving a nation with its own unique identity and history. Overall, despite the reasonability of demands based on economic, political, and cultural mistreatment and injustice in the context of Ethiopia, the idea and practice of secession appear less attractive and its feasibility an uphill battle in today’s world.

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- [1] Plaut, M. 2016. Understanding Eritrea: Inside Africa's Most Repressive State. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Praeg, B. 2006. Ethiopia and Political Renaissance in Africa. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- [4] Berhe, A. 2004. "The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front". African Affairs, Vol. 103, No. 413, pp. 569-592.
- [5] Ibid, p.527.
- [6] TPLF's manifesto (1976): https://tasew.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/tplf_manifesto_-_1968_e-c.pdf
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Gebreab in Praeg, B. (2006; p.81).
- [9] See <https://borkena.com/2018/02/06/tplf-struggles-to-restore-dominance/>
- [10] See <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5696030f4.html>
- [11] See <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/ethiopian-ogaden-rebels-abandon-secession-bid/>
- [12] See <http://addisstandard.com/commentary-legitimacy-at-home-is-legitimacy-abroad/>
- [13] Emily Wax, "As separatists in Ethiopia disarm, a new chapter for D.C.'s Oromo community" *the Washington Post*, April 1, 2012.
- [14] See <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/> and <https://www.globalpolicy.org/nations-a-states/failed-states.html>