

The Invention of Ethnic Politics - Messay Kebede

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Take a random group of Ethiopians as you find them in any public place. You will never hear them defining themselves by a single characteristic. If you ask one of them how a person is defined, he/she will say that a person is defined by age, gender, class, social role, religion, culture, ethnic background, etc. This same person is also Ethiopian, African, and human. This means that, outside a political realm, individuals see their personality as a heterogeneous unity, as the interactions, interpenetrations of multiple identities yielding a unified person, like different notes compose a musical piece. This heterogeneous self is the reality of all individuals, how they grasp their essence and existence. Be it noted that nothing is distinct or dominant in the claimed unity; rather, all the factors interpenetrate and constitute a changing and complex sense of oneself.

Let us follow these individuals in their place of work, worship, or hangouts. A slight change occurs: though they remain the same individuals, they alternatively assume distinct, dominant features. In their work place, they are teachers, soldiers, security officers, judges, etc.; in their worship place, they are Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Protestants, etc.; in their hangouts, they are friends or mates. And when they return home, they are fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, etc. In all these different places, one feature temporarily dominates all the rest.

Now let us go to a political meeting. Here profession and home personality subside into the background. Individuals are essentially labelled by their class, ethnic group, religion or gender, depending on the ideology of the group organizing the meeting. However, one difference springs up in the case of a meeting supporting an extremist agenda: not only are the leaders of the political meeting asking participants to subordinate all their person to one determination by which they demarcate themselves, but they also urge them to use the demarcation to oppose and exclude all those who do not belong to the same ethnic group, religion, or class. The intention is to obtain a high-powered mobilization by overvaluing one determination to the point of stirring up deep emotional forces, such as fear, resentment, and hatred, or superiority and domination.

The result of this one-sided conditioning is that individuals completely identify themselves with the overemphasized feature. Politicians promote this exclusory determination for two essential reasons. 1. It gives them complete control over the person: once they have induced a sectarian identity, they are in possession of a tool able to trigger at will all sorts of emotional responses from their followers. Evidently, the political elite cannot have absolute control over individuals if they retain many allegiances that involve them in different social milieus and entail different modes of association and behavior. 2. The overemphasized identity posits the exclusion of all who are not of the same religion, ethnic group, or class. These ordering crowns the excluders as the only legitimate representatives of the groups shaped by the segregating identities and, most importantly, repudiate all competing elites on the ground that they do not partake of the same identities.

A characteristic example of exclusion is the over determination of class in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which Ethiopian educated elites adopted in the 60s and 70s. As many of you remember, everything was then subordinated to class belonging and everything was analyzed from the perspective of class interests. The outcome was a politics of hatred against feudal and bourgeois classes and against all those who refused Marxism for one reason or another. It enabled the mobilization of peasants, workers and self-righteous students and intellectuals, the very ones who claimed to have committed class-suicide. Most of all, it promoted power-hungry elites to the rank of political and ideological leadership on the strength of their lofty commitment to justice and freedom for the masses. However, disgruntled and ambitious members of the Ethiopian armed forces came out with a similar commitment, the outcome of which was the formation of the Derg. We know the rest, especially how the Derg turned the ideology of exclusion of students and intellectuals against themselves and assumed the sole leadership of the revolution.

Weakened by the lack of internal support, the Derg was defeated by another politics of exclusion, this time based on ethnicity. Ethnic politics has its roots in the Marxist-Leninist ideology: like the latter, it is a politics of polarization (otherwise known as dialectics) aiming at destroying those perceived as opponents. This common inspiration facilitated the rise of ethnic ideology because the priority given to class by Marxism-Leninism had undermined national cohesion by presenting the imperial regime and the Derg as the dominance of the Amhara ethnic elite. Very early, those who created the TPLF understood that class exclusion, as advocated by the Marxist ideology, was a deadlock for them in that they would never achieve prominence on the national scene so long as the Amhara supremacy was still in place. To undermine that dominance, they needed a sectarian ideology not only for themselves but also for all non-Amhara Ethiopians: only in a country fragmented along ethnic politics could elite claiming to represent a minority group hope to conquer national prominence. With the help of the Stalinist version of Marxism, the founders of the TPLF reworked their socialist commitment in such a way that polarization moved from class to ethnicity. As a result, ethnic groups were baptized dominated nations, with the consequence that they gained the right to secede from Ethiopia if they so wish. With ethnicity, the leaders of the TPLF had thus created an exclusive entitlement to represent the Tigrean people, since unlike class or religion; the ethnic criterion excludes non-Tigrean from power competition. In addition, the fragmentation of Ethiopia gave them a hegemonic position as the only group commanding a viable armed force following the dissolution of the national army. To crown it all, the portrayal of the Amhara as the sole culprit for Tigrean marginalization and the so-called “ferocious colonial” conquest and mistreat of the Oromo and Southern peoples became the dominant discourse of ethnic federalism. The purpose of this exaggerated and one-sided portrayal is to harness powerful sentiments of resentment and hatred to the politics of exclusion whose sole goal is the empowerment of Tigrean elite.

Now contrast identity politics with the democratic ideal. Obviously, of all the forms of mobilization, the one that brings into play what individuals have in common rather than what separates them is none other than the democratic principle. It is inspired by the politics of human rights and expressly states that all individuals, regardless of age, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, etc., have equal rights. This form of mobilization comes close to the reality of the human person as a unity of heterogeneous commitments and is eminently refractory to the politics of exclusion. Its essence is to allow individuals to form free associations in accordance with their heterogeneous and varying interests and preoccupations.

To highlight the difference, take an Oromo for instance: besides being Oromo, he/she belongs to a class to which Amara and Tigreans belong as well; he/she is Christian or Muslim like Amhara and Gurage are Christian or Muslim; he/she is Ethiopian, then African, just like any other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. For an approach promoting human rights, the various identities of a person, far from being mutually exclusive, become complementary, thereby actualizing the reality of the human person as a unity of diversity.

Not so for ethnic politics: it reduces the human to one dimensionality and so is repressive, being but the manner people are shaped to empower a sectarian elite. It results in a closed society whose irony is that it must revive the diversity that it refuses in the name of ethnic purity in order to evolve into a democratic society. Indeed, in closing on itself, the ethnic community cannot but take note of its own internal divisions promoted by different class interests, diverse religious commitments, unequal regional and local statuses, etc. The way this diversity is recognized, better still allowed freedom of expression and organization decides its democratic future.

If diversity is a requirement of democratic organization, why then reject it in the greater union only to reestablish it in a smaller unit? Why not struggle here and now to organize the already given diversity into a democratic society? All the more reason for opting for the great union is that the postponement of democracy in the name of ethnicity could have the adverse effect of consecrating the model of a uniform society, which constitutes the stuff of all one-party systems, presidents for life, fundamentalist states, in short of dictatorial regimes. What political systems pursuing the socialist ideology, identifying state and religion, or enforcing ethnic hegemony or purity, have in common is the practice of exclusion and the attendant totalitarian rule. To say so is to understand that polarizing politics, whatever its claim, is never about democracy. It is about empowering elites whose exclusiveness requires nothing short of totalitarian rule.

The belief that identity politics is the path to democracy ignores at its own perils the lessons of its application in Ethiopia. Not only are other ethnic groups suffering under the yoke of the hegemony of one sectarian elite claiming to represent the interests of an ethnic group, but also those who are supposed to be represented are made powerless against their own representatives. Indeed, to politically challenge the Tigrean ruling elite, Tigreans need to associate with other ethnic groups and they cannot do so without going against identity politics and establishing associations with other people based on class, professional, religious, etc., interests. But in so doing, they are certain to provoke the repressive power of the elite representing them, which power is no longer dependent on Tigray because it controls the national state of Ethiopia. In sum, all those who expect democracy through the ethnic path should pause for one moment and ponder over the saying: “የቆጡን አወርድ-በላየ-በ-ብቷን ጣለኝ.”