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THE ETHNOPOLITICAL SITUATION IN THE
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by

Abdillahi H Jama

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Abdillahi H. Jama (Ph.D)

The industrial revolution and increasingly widespread democratic ideals in the world would seem to have been able to guarantee different states and societies against a return to ethnic dissensions (and frequently open conflict). However the new information revolution, the protest against the loss of cultural individuality within the developed countries and the development of ethnic self-awareness among many Afro-Asian nations have led to the phenomenon of an ethnic renaissance. The phenomenon is already being widely studied. The Horn of Africa is by no means an exception. Moreover these ethnopolitical processes have accelerated after the collapse of the Ethiopian empire.

But first of all it is necessary to dwell at least briefly on the premises of the formation of the modern ethnopolitical situation in the Horn of Africa.

At the end of the nineteenth century socio-political thought in Ethiopia and the political skirmishes between the different ruling groups brought to light different conceptions of the essence, means and ways of forming a centralized state. Emperor Yohannes IV was guided by one such conception. He was a sturdy supporter of creating a homogeneous confessional society in the entire territory of the Ethiopia of his time and saw in this the guarantee of the unity and power of the country (state)¹.

In historic Ethiopia Christian peoples with Semitic languages made up the majority of the population, with the exception of the "Wollo". On the Somalian socio-political scene Mohamed Abdullah Hassan also favoured the creation of a single, confessional state in the ethnic habitat of the Somalis.

A second conception for the formation of a centralized state in Ethiopia was supported by the Shoan dynasty. The essence of this view was to increase the territory of the state as much as possible by means of foreign expansion. Apart from subjective factors there were also objective considerations upon which both these conceptions were based.

Yohannes IV represented the interests of not just the Tigray dynasty, but also of other northern dynasties of Ethiopia. As direct successors to the Aksum civilization and state system, the ruling circles of the north had an interest in the creation of a homogeneous ethno-confessional state. The Shoan dynasty as border province had many advantages over the northern provinces, including relative tranquility, an advantageous geographic position at the convergence of many trade routes, more centralized power, i.e. the predominance of the king's will, the opportunity of constant expansion into the territory of the neighbouring peoples and pillaging them, the massive acquisition of firearms through contacts with European and other traders²; however it was not able to unite Christian Ethiopia by force. Yet in the end the Shoan dynasty won the leadership struggle not only because of the above mentioned advantages, but also because this dynasty had an entirely different concept of the essence of the new empire (state) that was taking shape.

At the end of the nineteenth century this second strategy gained the upper hand over the first one. Modern Ethiopia in its present borders is in fact the embodiment of the Shoan concept of the creation of a new Ethiopian state.

In essence the policy of Emperor Yohannes IV can be defined as national and confessional, aimed first and foremost at the unification of Ethiopia's dispersed Christian principalities on the basis of their (the peoples') common historic destiny, confessional unity and economic and cultural traditions. It follows from this vision of state building that only after the strengthening of such a kind of state would it be possible to expand its territory, but not to the detriment of the confessional principle according to which it was built.

Because of the Shoan dynasty's different historical experience Menelik's policy was diametrically opposed to that of Yohannes. The essence of his policy can be defined as imperialist, based on the conquering of foreign territories and the enslavement of the peoples inhabiting these territories by means of systematic pillage. This policy was aimed at denationalizing the ruling groups of the conquered peoples and reducing the rest of the

population to serfs.³ Depending on the level of resistance he met, Menelik established indirect or direct rule of the conquered territories.⁴

The triumph of the second tendency as symbolized by the Shoan dynasty headed by Emperor Menelik laid the foundation for all the modern interethnic and interconfessional dissensions and conflicts in Ethiopia. In exactly the same way the defeat of the national liberation movement headed by Mohamed Abdullah Hassan formed the basis for the strengthening of the colonial division of the Somalian peninsula and the victory of Menelik's policy in the south of the Ethiopian empire.

On an ethnopolitical level, the main results of the formation of the Ethiopian empire and the division of Somalia can be summarized as follows:

- the consolidation of the denationalization process among the leading class of the conquered peoples by way of their cooptation into the governing of the empire at various levels;
- the colossal quantitative growth of the new ruling class, especially after the Battle at Adwa (1896) mainly as a result of Naftagna and the expropriation of land for the benefit of the conquerors and the local collaborating leaders;
- the consolidation of the basic principle of forming a state bureaucracy and the granting of landownership rights exclusively to Christians;
- the final forming of the basic subethnoses of the Amharic people - the Shoans, Gojjams and Gonderians ;
- the isolation of the Tigraian people and the evolution of their ethnoconfessional identification to ethnic self-awareness; the stimulus for this evolution was Menelik's "betrayal" of Eritrea and the struggle for the autonomous status of Tigray.

The entire policy of Emperor Haile Selassie and the military government which deposed him but inherited the imperial spirit, was aimed not only at the preservation of the empire but also at the further supercentralization of this state apparatus. Of course military suppression of any resistance from the conquered peoples would only be natural. The

results of this policy are common knowledge, as they have been thoroughly studied in literature⁵.

The crisis of the empire began during the reign of the last Ethiopian emperor, and the military regime, as a result of its transitory nature, only aggravated this crisis. It was precisely during the rule of this regime that the majority of ethno-social movements became stronger and in the end toppled it. The power was taken over by an interim government in Ethiopia headed by the EPRDM and its allies. The national policy of the interim government is in fact the first attempt at decolonizing Ethiopia and demystifying the sociopolitical life of the country on the basis of universally recognized democratic principles such as the rights of all peoples to self-determination, freedom of speech, etc. Eritrea's independence and the new national administrative subdivision of the country reflect the essence of this new policy -- figuratively speaking one could say that it is Yohannes IV's "revenge" over Menelik.

As for Somalia, its colonial division led to a certain modification of the Somali ethnic structure. It accelerated (but did not create) the break-up of the big nomadic sub-ethnos into smaller ones. However, this division did not lead to ethno-transformational processes within the Somalian ethnos. The reasons for this phenomenon can be found in the following factors:

- the briefness of the colonial period;
- the incompatibility of the economic and cultural character of the Somalis (nomadism) with the dominating socio-economic style of the neighbouring as well as more distant peoples;
- the confessional and linguistic differences between the Somalis and the English, French, Ethiopians and Kenyans;
- in Ethiopia and Kenya the Somalian regions were mostly located on the periphery;

- the powerful national liberation movement in the form of an insurgent and later party political movement, expressed in the ideology of pan-Somalism, which has spread to every corner of the Somalian ethnic habitat;
- and the maturing of ethnic self-awareness among the Somalis.

All these factors have formed the basis of a constant search for the best ways and means of creating a common Somalian state. I.M. Lewis accurately defined this movement as "a nation in search of a state". The main impediment in the way of achieving this goal has, however, been the fact that the Somalian people lag behind in the economic, social and cultural fields.

This, in brief, is the background to the contemporary ethnopolitical situation in the countries of the Horn of Africa. An analysis of the specific traits of these processes in the given region will of course require of us at least a brief excursion into the general problems surrounding these ethnic processes.

The ethnic processes can be divided into two fundamental types: ethno-unifying and ethno-divisional processes⁶. The main ethno-unifying types are: consolidation, integration and assimilation. Consolidation is either the merging of some close kindred peoples into a unified, new, bigger ethnos (interethnic consolidation), or the forming of greater internal cohesion in a big ethnos through the smoothing out of differences between its different sub-ethnoses (intra-ethnic consolidation). Integration is the interaction of different unrelated ethnoses within a single state. The result of such a process is the arisal of a meta-ethnopolitical community.

The main ethno-divisional processes are: ethnic partition, ethnic separation and ethnic dispersion.

Under ethnic partition we understand a situation where a previously unified ethnos breaks up into different parts (all more or less equal), and the new parts do not identify themselves with the previous ethnos. Ethnic separation is understood to be when a part of a

single ethnos splits away from the main ethnos and with time turns into an independent ethnos.

Those ethnic processes which do not affect the main parameters of any ethnos are known as ethno-evolutionary processes. When these processes lead to changes in ethnic identity, like the disappearance or appearance of new ethnoses, they are known as ethnotransformational processes. As an illustration let us examine the process of ethnic consolidation.

Intra-ethnic consolidation is an evolutionary process as it amounts to the consolidation of homogenisation, i.e. the proliferation within a single ethnos of a native ethnic language, the strengthening of the general ethnic self-consciousness, the fading of ethnographic differences, etc.

In the Horn of Africa the most characteristic processes are the ethno-unifying ones in the form of ethnic consolidation. The course this process takes depends in its turn on a whole series of factors, of which the main ones are: the population's level of socio-economic development; the intensiveness of economic ties between the various parts of the population; the geographic conditions; migrational processes; the ethnic structure of the population; the language, cultural and religious cohesion of the population; the racial cohesion of the population; the level of development of the written language and forms of the literary language; colonial subjugation or political independence of a country⁷, and in the case of colonial subjugation the nature of this subjugation⁸ and the extent of resistance among the population; the presence of a state system or its absence; state borders; the geopolitical location of the country, etc...

By the end of the nineteenth century there were in general two economic and cultural types in the Horn of Africa: sedentary (plough) agriculture with a "feudal" social structure (the traditional Ethiopian regions) and nomadism (the Somalis, Afars and other peoples.) Both economic systems were based on the conditions from which they arose (land extension). Of these two socio-economic systems, the first was more developed.

However the geographic conditions of their settling greatly hampered the processes of ethnic consolidation of the northern peoples of Ethiopia, for the mountain ranges allowed each ruler to be protected from his neighbours. And vice-versa: the broad plains of the Somalian peninsula greatly promoted contact between the Somalian subethnoses.

Migrational processes also influence the processes of ethnic consolidation. As regards the Oromo people, it was in fact the large expansion of its ethnic territory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which led not only to economic, cultural and religious differentiation within this people, but also as a consequence of the above said to great hampering of ethnic consolidation among the Oromo. To varying extents this applies to the majority of peoples of the Horn of Africa.

The ethnic structure of the population exerts a significant influence on the consolidatory processes. The main hindrance in the way of the ethnic consolidation of the Somalis, Oromo and Afar is the clan structure, or to be more accurate, the subethnic division of these ethnoses. These and other ethnoses undergo two different processes: micro- and macroconsolidation.

Microconsolidation takes place by way of the unification of various tribes into larger subethnic units, e.g. the Darod, Hawiye, and Dir among the Somalis, the Tulema, Macha, Boran and others among the Oromo; the Shoans, Gojjams, Gonderians, among the Amharas, etc.

Macroconsolidation is national consolidation expressed in a general ethnic self-awareness. Ideologies such as Pan-Somalism, Pan-Oromoism, Pan-Amharism, etc. are in fact an expression (reflexion) of this process. Interaction between these two objective processes vitally influence the socio-political and economic stability of these peoples and the states of the Horn of Africa. All attempts to artificially accelerate or eradicate these processes have always in the end failed. One can take as an example the struggle of the Siad Barre regime in Somalia against Somalian subethnoses which led to the opposite results: the violation of the natural historic micro- and macroconsolidatory processes.

Possession of a written language plays a significant rôle in ethnic consolidation. But here we first have to make a few points clear. Firstly, the presence of a common literary language. Secondly, the choice of one of the dialects as literary language. Thirdly, the opportunity for the free development of a literary, i.e. national language. The creation of different versions of the literary language in many ways impedes consolidatory processes. The history of the peoples of the Horn of Africa abounds with such examples.⁹ In Ethiopia such a situation existed until 1991, i.e. until the military dictatorship was overthrown, as different versions of the literary language were then in use (Somali, Oromo, Afar and others). The situation was the same in Somalia until 1972.

The confessional composition of the population also significantly influences the consolidatory process. In the Horn of Africa the most "fortunate" peoples in this respect are the Tigreans, Amhara, Somalis and Afars, while the Oromo are the most "unfortunate". The peoples of the Horn of Africa can be divided in two confessional communities - Christians and Muslims. However there is an enormous difference between confessional and ethnic community. The characteristic traits of ethnic communities include a single language, a common culture, self-awareness as expressed by an ethnonim, etc. Confessional communities are multilingual. However the long-standing privileges of Christianity in Ethiopia and the discrimination against Muslims made cooperation between Muslims a vital necessity, and this circumstance at times pushed differences between their ethnic communities into the background. After 1991, as soon as the rights of the two confessions were equalized, interethnic discord between Muslims rose to the surface.

Confessionally the Oromo are in the most difficult position of all the peoples of the Horn of Africa. World history knows of examples where a single ethnos disintegrated into various ethnic communities because of confessional differences. A glaring example is the fate of the Southern Slavs, the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians (Muslims). One has to, however, take into consideration several significant nuances in the history of the Oromo. Firstly the syncretic nature of Christianity and Islam among the majority of Oromo.

Secondly, the ethnonational awakening of this people. And last but by no means the least, the fact that the majority of the Oromo ended up within the boundaries of the Ethiopian empire as a result of Menelik's expansion policy. It is an irony of history that Emperor Menelik II had given the Oromo this "golden chance" (speaking on an historic scale). Had the Oromo been divided like the Somalis into different colonial entities, while retaining their confessional differences, one wonders whether they (the Oromo) would have preserved any chance at ethnic unity. Perhaps they would not have escaped the fate of the Bengals, Punjabs and others. (Incidentally, one could argue that emperor Menelik unconsciously played the rôle of the "demiurge" of present-day Oromo nationalism).

All the peoples of the Horn of Africa are experiencing a surge in ethnic self-awareness. But it is accompanied by a search for different ways of creating the main attributes of statehood, thus making the ethnic differences more acute.

When analyzing the genesis of ethnic self-awareness, especially with regard to the peoples of Ethiopia, it is extremely important to take into consideration one very important circumstance: the historic fate of the Ethiopian peoples is in many ways similar to that of the former Ottoman empire. In empires such as the Ottoman or Ethiopian empires the dominating people is the main vehicle of "national" self-awareness ("Ottomanism", Ethiopianism, etc.)

When the Turkish scholar Z. Gokalp at the beginning of the twentieth century analysed the genesis and development of ethno-national self-awareness among the peoples of the Ottoman empire, he emphasized that this self-awareness developed in the following sequence: first the non-Muslim peoples, then the Albanians and Arabs and finally the Turks. Gokalp arrives at the conclusion: "This was not by chance, as the Turks dominated and believed in Ottomanism more than anyone else."¹

In this sense the position of the Amhara is similar to that of the Turks. Of all the peoples of Ethiopia the Amhara had the greatest faith in Ethiopianism (as some of them still do.) The reason can be found in the fact that the Amhara's self awareness has not

adopted a final shape and is still to an extent lagging behind. However after 1991, when the dictatorial regime was overthrown, the ethno-national self-awareness of the Amhara has gradually started liberating itself from the notion of associating itself with Ethiopianism. This is however a rather contradictory process. This is corroborated by the arising of such organisations as the All-Amhara People's Organisation.

The Tigreans have the most developed ethnic self-awareness of all the peoples of Ethiopia. It started developing among the Tigrean feudal lords and rulers after the Shoans usurped power at the end of the previous century. Their ancient history, including the fact that they are the direct heirs of the Aksum culture and statehood and preservers of the medieval Abyssinian culture, gives them the right to call themselves, as Donald Levine has accurately put it, "the cultural aristocrats of Ethiopia." ¹¹

Another circumstance connected with the development of ethnic self-awareness among the Tigreans is their longstanding struggle against the central Ethiopian authorities' policy of denationalisation and assimilation, a struggle for political, cultural and economic autonomy. One therefore has all justification to claim that the forming of Tigrean nationhood has become irreversible.

In the whole the process through which nations come to being in Ethiopia is not leading to an ethnic amalgamation of the biggest ethnoses of the country, but to the consolidation of each and every one of the main ethnoses.

As far as the forming of a Somalian nation is concerned, the ethno-territorial disunity of the Somali people is greatly hampering the strengthening of their ethno-national self-awareness. Regardless of any state borders, intensive cultural exchange between Somalis from different countries of the Horn of Africa, is still continuing. Therefore as long as the will and desire to unite still exists among the Somalis, the possibility that the ethno-national community of the Somalis will not disintegrate still remains.

Conclusion:

The ethnopolitical situation in the Horn of Africa is once again, as at the end of the last century, undergoing serious transformation. Eritrea has won its independence, the Shoaan political rule and imperial philosophy have failed and been discarded by the peoples of Ethiopia, and they have received in its place a unique opportunity to rule themselves and live in harmony on an equal basis, although the old ethnic and religious differences are to a certain extent hindering these positive processes. Any relapse to the old imperial policy in Ethiopia will sound the death-knell for this state.

As for Somalia, the experience of the last thirty years has shown the futility of an excessively centralised state system. This system has disregarded the compatibility of the macro- and micro-ethnic interests. In this sense it would be wiser to transform the unitary state into a federal system on the basis of mainly the major sub-ethnoses of the Somali community. This would minimize the excessive concentration of state power in the hands of certain sub-ethnoses, and of course would greatly reduce the unhealthy rivalry between the elite sub-ethnoses for the top positions in the state bureaucracy. Such a transformation is necessary not only for the stability and development of Somalia but also for the well-being of the whole region, as a reversal to the old highly centralised and "nationalistic" policies would greatly hamper the new democratic and promising transformations in the region.

The peoples of the Horn of Africa have received the rarest of historical chances to change the course of fate for their own benefit. Will they succeed?

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