

AFAR PERCEPTION AND REALITY AFTER 1991 RECONSTITUTION OF ETHIOPIA BY EPRDF

1. INTRODUCTION

In the successive ranking order of the 9 Ethiopian federal regions the Afar region is second only to Region One (the Tigray or the Royal Region), the home of the dominant ethnic group and the ruling party (TPLF) since the reconstitution and remapping of Ethiopia in 1991. The similarities between the 2 regions ends here. So, there is no room for any further comparison between Region One and Region Two, with the exception of the ranking order. In actual fact, together with the other 3 regions, such as Somali, Gambela and Beni-Shangul Gumuz, it is one of the four backward regions. It is no exaggeration to say that Killil 2, both in terms of infrastructure and skilled human power, is the least (worst afflicted?) of the four underdeveloped regions. The Afars are one of the most marginalized nationalities in the country.

Because of the recurrent droughts that hit the Afar areas, they are on the brink of extinction. The Afars have to fight for their mere survival. But, in spite of their marginalization and underdevelopment, their lack of infrastructure, the blatant intervention by the cadres of the ruling party (TPLF) from Mekelle (the capital city of Tigray region), the Afar and the Afar Triangle, as they call their land, which straddles the three countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, are at the centre of a number of **CONFLICTS**.

Just to mention few:

- Ethiopian Sea outlet
- Strategically placed roads (Addis Ababa-Assab; Addis Ababa-Djibouti)
- Deposits of strategic minerals
- Increasing importance of Red Sea as international sea passage
- The Ethiopian sea outlet as an issue in the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict
- Pastoralists versus state conflicts, inter-ethnic conflicts with Issa-Somalis, Oromos and Amharas
- Drought (NB. not a conflict as such?)

The last batch of United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), composed of soldiers from different countries, left the Ethio-Eritrea border last week. Two weeks back, General Abebe Tekle Haimanot, the former chief of the Ethiopian Air Force, senior TPLF cadre, commander in the times of armed struggle and presently a lecturer in Law, stated in an interview that the TPLF have realized that by giving away the Eritrean coast they have committed a geopolitical and geostrategic blunder that is detrimental to the national security of Ethiopia. The issue of the necessity of a sea outlet (port) for Ethiopia is becoming a topical issue again.

The PM Mele's rhetoric that port service is no more than a commodity like any service that can be bought from the lowest bidder from the North-Eastern African ports – from Port Sudan in the north to Mombasa in the south – is under fire, and this time, it is from his ex-comrades-in-arms. Opposition party leaders, like Yacoub Haile Mariyam, have not only called for the bringing back of the port of Assab, but saw it as part and parcel of the reunification of the Red Sea Afars with their brothers in Ethiopia. This is going further than the usual rhetoric on the Ethio-Eritrean border dispute. This claim is an existential threat to the state of Eritrea as the Afar Red Sea coast comprises 2/3 of Eritrea's Red Sea coastline.

2. ERITREAN INDEPENDENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCE FOR ETHIOPIA IN GENERAL AND FOR THE AFAR IN PARTICULAR

In 1991, when Eritrea became independent, Ethiopia's landlockedness was one of the most hotly debated issues. It was because of this negotiating away of their sea outlet that quite a number of Ethiopians opposed their new rulers from Tigray. It was because of this that the Afars had to face both the TPLF in the saddle of power in Addis Ababa and the EPLF in Eritrea. And still, the sea outlet controversy is being as hotly debated as it has been over the last 18 years, ever since the coming into power of EPRDF and its reconstitution and remapping of Ethiopia.

3. EPRDF'S RATIONALE FOR THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE ETHIOPIAN EMPIRE

According to article 39.3 "every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in State and Federal Governments"

- Enable various communities to govern their local affairs.
- Elect their leaders, which are accountable to them.

"In its largest sense...federalism is more than an arrangement of government structures; it is a mode of political activity that requires certain kinds of cooperative relationships through the political system it animates." **Elazar, Daniel.**

There is little cooperative relationship in the Ethiopian federal arrangement.

4. WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE ETHIOPIAN FEDERAL ARRANGEMENT?

- Creation of formal federal regions only as a posture
- Little or no alteration of state relations
- Only formal representation
- Little partnership
- One ethnic group dominates the political representation
- The arrangement does not mitigate tensions among various groups
- The arrangement accentuates ethnic cleavages
- Little or no alteration to power relations in Ethiopia
- Used the state for more share in national resources for one region
- Against all federalist principles

5. THE ETHIOPIAN FEDERAL ARRANGEMENT AND ITS OPPONENTS

- Instrument for monopoly of power of TPLF

- Politicisation of ethnic identity and “ethnic federalism”
- Malevolence of ruling and dominant Tigray elites under TPLF
- “Ethnic conflicts”
- A recipe for disintegration of the country
- More access to resources and decision-making for one region (Killil)
- Access to state resources and decision making.

6. THE AFAR PARTICULARITIES – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- Large measure of historic autonomy and self-rule
- Identifiable, clear-cut contiguous territory
- Well-articulated self-consciousness (not proffered from outside)
- Not incorporated into central region
- Afars quest for administrative unity (5 Teqlay Giizat)
- Under Haile Selassie
- Under Derg
- Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM) - accepting NDR programme and joining the revolutionary camp
- Short-lived -Assab Autonomous Region, 1989-1991(Assab Ras Gezz)
- Resistance against TPLF’s Eritrean policy
- Resistance of UGUUGUMO, Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF)
- Sultan Ali Mirah – Afar Liberation Front (ALF), an ally from the time of armed struggle against DERG
- Sheik Hussein Mussa – Afar Liberation Front No 2 against the TPLF

7. ANOMALIES: REALITY AND PERCEPTION

- Fight for Decentralization
- Fight for Federalism
- Fight for Ethiopian unity
- Fight for Ethiopian unity – Reunification of Red Sea Coast
- Fight for Afar unity – Reunification of Red Sea Coast
- Pan-Afar – Pan Ethiopian
- No separate home land (Greater Afarland)

The Afars fight for the proper application of the federal system. They fight against the loop-sided application and irresponsible manipulative machinations of the Tigray minority ruling group as represented by the ruling TPLF against the federal system. It is this group that sows discord and hatred among various nationalities of Ethiopia and misuses the federal arrangement for keeping the rest in perpetual conflict to insure their minority hegemony.

The Afars fight for the further decentralization of the Ethiopian state and empowerment of the nationalities in their own regions. On the other hand, their fighting for the reunification of the Afar Red Sea coastline with the Ethiopian Afarland, which is the historical hinterland of the Afar Triangle, bestowed on the Afars certain pan-Ethiopian obligations.

In their struggle for the reunification of the Red Sea coastline and the nullification of Ethiopia's recent landlockedness, they stand side by side with the Ethiopian nationalists. As an immediate result of Eritrea's independence, the Afars lost the coastal region and the Assab and Massawa ports. The Afars lost their Autonomous Region of Assab as it was dismantled by the triumphant Eritreans. Making Ethiopia a Red Sea coastline state again is a task that the Afars have to shoulder with the rest of the Ethiopian nationalists. But they are up against Only Assab seekers among them.

But the Afars have an issue with Ethiopian nationalists who look upon the federal system with fear and scepticism. On the issue of the federal system, they lean towards the forces that fight for decentralization and empowerment of the nationalities, such as the Oromo, the Ogadeni and Sidama nationalists. Those are the anomalies of the Afar realities 18 years after the reconstitution and remapping of Ethiopia by ruling EPRDF (TPLF).

8. LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE – THE AFARS AND THE REGIONAL STATES

- The increasing importance of securing the Red Sea and particularly Bab- el Mandab
- Radicalization in Somalia and Al-Qaida is winning foothold in nearby Yemen
- If there is a political sensation of Islamic identity among Ethiopian Muslims - Afar Region could be one of the places where this radicalization could easily spill over

9. AFARS AS STAKE HOLDERS AND BRIDGE BUILDERS

- The Afars are part of the equation and the solution.
- The Afars form a bridge of understanding between the three regional states.
- They can push for more understanding among the peoples and states of the sub-region.
- They are one of the stake-holders in a stable region.
- Cooperation and integration draw their unification nearer.
- Destabilization worsens their marginalization.
- Destabilization postpones their unification.

Finding a workable and operational formula for a lasting peaceful solution to all of the above-mentioned challenges is **NOT** an impossible task. But it is not an easy challenge. I hope that our meeting can contribute with its share in illuminating how to tackle this challenge.

Thank you!!!!

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