

Divide and Rule: Ethnic Federalism in Benishangul Gumuz Region of Ethiopia

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(This writing is an extract from a research made by the author regarding the operation of ethnic federalism in the Benishangul-Gumuz, SNNP and Oromia regional states.)

Introduction

Since 1991 the political power in the regional state has been characterized by unpredictability and ineffectiveness. Though immaturity in political leadership could be cited as a cause, other factors such as inter-ethnic as well as intra-ethnic rivalries, and the intriguing and self-serving role of the TPLF have played a significant role in creating turmoil and unpredictability in the regional state political structure.

The regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz is located in the northwestern part of Ethiopia. According to the 1994 population census, the regional state has an estimated population of 460, 459 of which Benishangul ethnic group (or Berta) accounts 26.7 percent, Gumuz 23.4 percent, Amhara 22.2 percent, Oromo 12.8 percent, Shinasha 6.9 percent, Agew 3.8 percent, Mao 0.6 percent, Komo 0.2 percent and others 4 percent. Benishangul and Gumuz account 50 percent of the population. The so-called non-indigenous people account about 44 percent of the population of the regions.

Initially, the regional administration was established by the elites from the five “indigenous” communities under the leadership and dominance of the Benishangul (Berta) political elite. The dominant role of the Benishangul elite was owing to their close cooperation with the TPLF and EPLF in Sudan, their involvement in the armed struggle against the Derg and, their majority population size in the region. Thus, they controlled key political and administrative posts like the regional state president. However, since 1996 due to disagreement with the TPLF, the dominant role of the Benishangul elite has been reduced and replaced by the Gumuz elite allied with the Shinasha elite. This has created unhealthy relationship among the major indigenous ethnic elites that have dominated the state government. Instead of cooperation and compromise, the ethnic relations have been filled with mistrust and revulsion against each other that has become obstacle for genuine cooperation and compromise among the ethnic elites. This drastically reduced the effectiveness of the regional state government to deliver the needed livelihood improvement of the impoverished communities of the regional state.

The TPLF’s divide and rule policy in the region

According to various interviews with the regional and zonal officials, the first most important factor that created tension in the region was the earlier decision of the TPLF in imposing the hegemony of the Benishangul elite in the regional government. Earlier close relationship with the TPLF in Sudan helped the Benishangul elite to assume a prominent role in the formation and organisation of the regional state structure and also to play a hegemonic role. As a result, the Benishangul People Liberation Movement (BPLM) became a single dominant party by recruiting and acquiring more members from other indigenous ethnic communities in the region under the dominant role of the Benishangul elites. The TPLF facilitated the Benishangul political elite’s hegemonic role owing to their collaboration in the Sudan and their close relationship to the government of Sudan and Eritrea. This was done, of course, at the expense of the other indigenous ethnic communities like Gumuz and Shinasha people in the region. For instance, in the first national parliament in 1995, the Benishangul ethnic group was allowed to take five seats, but, in accordance with the rules, they should have been

granted only one seat. Gumuz and Shinasha politicians were 'pressured and persuaded' to join BPLM without their consent and freewill. This unfairly imposed arrangement has created resentment by Gumuz and Shinasha and produced inter-ethnic tensions within the BPLM which was a dominant party in the regional state in the early 1990s.

In 1994-95, a disagreement has occurred between the Benishangul elites and the TPLF due to the tension between the TPLF and the Sudan government, firstly in connection with the growing hostility between Eritrea and Sudan in 1994/5 and, secondly, because of the attempted assassination on the Egyptian president in Addis Ababa in 1995. Initially, the close relationship between the TPLF and the Sudanese government suffered because of the emerged hostility between the governments of Eritrea and Sudan in 1994, in which TPLF was siding with the Eritrean government. According to an interview with a member of the national parliament in Ethiopia, the Sudanese authority tried to convince the Ethiopian government officials that the hostility was between Sudan and Eritrea and therefore they requested impartiality from the TPLF. But the TPLF officials declined the request and openly echoed that their support was for Eritrea. The already deteriorated relation with Sudan faced with a total break down when the Ethiopian government swiftly and officially implicated the government of Sudan in the attempted assassination of the Egyptian president in Addis Ababa in 1995. This was also a good opportunity for the TPLF to break its relation with its earlier key supporter (the Sudan government) in order to get a generous support and approval from the US, which was working hard to alienate the Islamic Sudanese government.

For many observers, it appeared that the TPLF had got a 'golden' opportunity to make a swift move, before making an adequate investigation, to break its relation with Sudan in order to completely jump into the US bandwagon, which it has been avariciously looking for. From the start, the TPLF had wanted to cool down its relation with the Sudan government in order to get new powerful and rich friends in the West. It was very difficult to have close relationship with the West and the Sudan government at the same time. This kind of an opportunistic move, to seek new allies at the expenses of old-times indispensable and crucial supporters, has been the hallmarks of the TPLF. If the rush was not made for such political opportunism, a proper and adequate investigation should have been done to prove whether the accusation and allegation that implicates the Sudanese government in the assassination attempt was true. It was a surprise for many and a shock to the TPLF that the government of Egypt itself did not believe in a direct involvement of the Sudanese government in the incident, rather the Egyptian government blamed the attempt on members of Egypt's militant Gama'a al Islamiya. Also, according to the London-Based AL-HAYAT daily that a man who called himself Abul Noor, who the paper said belonged to bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization, as saying in an interview that a foiled attempt to assassinate Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995 had been planned for three months in Somalia and Afghanistan and that the people who planned it allocated \$ 200,000 for the task.

Consequently, the above factors combined have brought a significant consequence in reshaping political alignments and arrangements in Benishangul-Gumuz regional state. It was obvious that many of the Benishangul political elites have a good relationship with the Sudan government due to some support they had received in the armed struggle period in 1980s, which was, of course, facilitated by the TPLF and EPLF in Sudan. But because of the emerging new foreign policy interest of the TPLF, the dominant role of the Benishangul political elite in the region was calculated as a threat to the TPLF. The Benishangul elites were inexpert to comprehend TPLF's tricky political

game, and failed to bring a united platform to protect their interest and therefore easily exposed to the punitive measures of the TPLF for their good relationships with the Sudanese authority that the TPLF was facilitating and backing when it was in the Sudan. Internal division within the Benishangul political elites because of provincialism and greed for power has also played a role in exposing them easily to the TPLF's shroud political game. As a result, the TPLF had demoted the Benishangul political elites and promoted the Gumuz elites to hold key political positions in the regional state.

In June 1996, the then prime minister Tamrat Layne opened the so-called Peace, Democracy, and Development Conference in Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State by urging participants to unseat regional officials whom he called 'narrow nationalists and agents of foreign powers'. Thus, what followed was the dismissal of all members of the Regional Council, except the president. A report states that in August 1997 that at least 120 former officials remained in detention in the region without charges (Human Right Watch 1997: 21). 'Ten prominent leaders of the BPLM, and which controlled the regional government until its rift with the TPLF-remained in detention in military camps and transferred to official prison in Assosa in January 1997. The dispute between the TPLF and local officials provided the context for the dismissal of most of the regional police force, about 800 men, and the recruitment of new officers' (Ibid. p. 21). A writer John Young (in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, 2) also argues that the dismissal of officials and civil servants alleging for 'anti-peace and antidevelopment' activities' was a phrase assumed to cover accusing of being Sudanese agents. Some of the dismissed include the vice-chairman of the region, the education bureau head, and the Ethiopian ambassador to Yemen, Yussuf Hammed Nasser (Young 1999: 333).

As a result, the TPLF had demoted the Benishangul political elites and promoted the Gumuz elites to hold key political positions in the regional state. The BPLM lost most of its leadership and therefore reorganized under a different name and new leadership. An informant claimed that the new leadership of both the party and the regional government did not have the mandate of the Benishangul people. The new regional administration headed by Yaregal Ayesheshume has been a source of fierce resentment from the Benishangul group. It has become an unacceptable by the Benishangul elite who believes that their ethnic group should get an upper hand in leading the regional government owing to their majority population and their significant contribution to the armed struggle.

The option picked by the TPLF to solve the political predicament in the region marked by an egoistic option that serves the interests of the TPLF. Favouring the minority group against the majority group is the hallmark of TPLF's Machiavellian style politics and, above all, it is the political logic of the TPLF: a rule of the minority over the majority. By favouring the minority against the majority, the TPLF can get a total submission and loyalty from the minority. Because, the minority can clearly understand that without the TPLF's favour it could not get a privileged and dominant position by subduing the majority. Of course, this is against the principles of the TPLF's policy of ethnic entitlement and also in contrary with the ambiguous and ostentatious constitution.

The strategy has however not brought the much needed stability or effective governance in the region. Rather, it created tensions within indigenous ethnic groups. According to information from Benishangul as well as Gumuz regional officials, the relationship between the two indigenous ethnic communities has been deteriorating. There have been an open and frequent ethnic naming and accusations. According to a Benishangul informant that: 'We have never been in such kinds of

hostility and hate against Gumuz people. We feel that Gumuz people are collaborating with the TPLF by plotting against us, who are their close neighbour'. For the Benishangul elites, it is the situation in which the minority ethnic group is imposing its authority on the majority ethnic group, which is contrary to the ethnic federal principles that stipulate a proportional representation in accordance with the size of ethnic group's population. They feel rage that Gumuz and Shinasha elites are betraying them by collaborating with the TPLF that wanted to demote and disfranchise the Benishangul elite.

This divisive political game by the TPLF appears to aggravate resentments not only limited to the Benishangul elites but also slowly encompassing the Benishangul community. Many Benishangul politicians, including those organised in the new party created by the TPLF, has expressed that the people of Benishangul are not fairly and adequately represented in the regional state. According to an elder from Benishangul that: 'Living in a boarder area is very problematic for our people; both governments have suspicion on us and always want to divide and rule us. For Sudan government, we are Ethiopians, for Ethiopian government we are Sudanese, and for the SPLA we are Muslim. We are always named as Islamic fundamentals, extremists and Sudanese. But we are always Ethiopian. The TPLF cadres in our region have become a source of tension and division among the indigenous ethnic groups. They are forcing us to follow a radical path such as, to take arms to fight for our rights.'

Disregard of the political and human rights of other groups

Since the regional state council is established by the five indigenous ethnic groups that consist of 56 percent of total population of the regional state, 44 percent of the regional population was not represented. Except a few individuals who are members of the EPRDF, the majority have no political rights to be represented at the zonal, regional and national level. For example in 2001 and 2005 election no representative from the so-called 'non-indigenous' community was elected for the regional council and national parliament. In Assosa town 67 percent of the inhabitants, in Assosa zone 43 percent, in Metekel zone 50 percent and in Kamashi zone 20 percent of the 'non-indigenous' communities are not represented in zonal and regional government structures in compliance with their citizenship rights.

'Non-indigenous' communities are not allowed to exercise their democratic right to be elected to the regional legislative body due to the rule that stipulates that a member of the legislative council should speak at least one indigenous language of the regional state. It is however obvious that Amharic language is the official language of the regional government and it is also a working language of the regional council, therefore putting indigenous language proficiency requirement in order to be elected for the regional legislative appears to be simply a discriminatory measure against 44 percent of the inhabitants of the regional state who are not speaking the indigenous languages. Assosa town is a good example, the town has about 14,701 (2000) population of which the majority inhabitants (about 70 percent) are not from the indigenous Benishangul community, but the political leadership of the town is controlled by the Benishangul elite.

The most serious and frequent discrimination and abuses of human as well as political rights have been made against the settlers. For example, in Assosa zone, the enclosed homeland for the Benishangul ethnic group, the settlers are estimated about 50,000. They were brought to the area by the Derg regime due to the major 1984 famine in Ethiopia and, at present they account about 25 percent of the population in Assosa zone. These settlers in 55 settlement villages have no political representation at regional, zonal and woreda administration levels. Their administrative and political

representation is restricted at the kebele administration level, but the kebele platform is designed to impose orders and control from the higher authorities from the wereda, zonal and regional levels, and without a reciprocal power to influence decisions and authority.

The settlers are exposed to gross violations of their rights like eviction, limiting their freedom of movements, destroying their property and other similar cruel atrocities. It has become possible to assure relative peace and order in the area with the involvement of the military force, however deep in the villages and in routine interaction, the settlers are always exposed to every type of harassment and intimidation. Minor tensions such as children's quarrels in a school could grow into ethnic clashes in which the zonal and wereda officials are interfering impartially and ethnically.

In 1993 many settlers were killed, their property destroyed and their homes were burned. In order to end their ill treatment and discrimination, the settlers have demanded the federal government to intervene to respect their constitutional rights and demanded for political and administrative representation in the regional government structures. But the response they got was insufficient. The TPLF, which had a warm relation with the BPLM at that time, was not keen to spoil its relation with the Benishangul elite. The national electoral board and the EPRDF's official strongly rejected the settlers demand for political and administrative representation in the regional government. The election board rejected the demand based on the dispensable or inessential electoral declaration that stipulates fluency in one of the regional indigenous languages is a requirement to stand for a political office. According to the regional official, in 1993 conference in Nekempt, Abbay Tsehaye (member of the TPLF executive committee) openly stated that the settlers were settled in the region for the only reason of getting land and food, which are more important than political power, and thus their demand for representation was totally rejected.

The regional political elites are worried about the settlements due to political motives: massive population concentration of non-indigenous community in their ethnic enclave could raise a demand for political representation in near future that could reduce their hegemonic position at wereda, zonal and regional levels. The indigenous political elites claim that the settlement was motivated for political and strategic reason in the past associated with the conflict, rather than for humanitarian or drought reasons. Thus, according to the informants, the indigenous political elites are highly interested in indigenising their ethnic enclaves.

Actually, since the settlers are living compactly in adjoining areas, they should have been provided with some sort of semi-autonomous administrative territory and a political representation in the regional and government and national parliament. However, in the TPLF's political calculation, political expediencies are more important than people's rights. The TPLF do not want to sacrifice its good relation with the regional political elites because of siding with the rights of the settlers. The TPLF has also worried about the strong operation and presence of OLF in the area, thus rift with the regional elites could become a counterproductive. There has also been similar tension in Metekel zone, which contains tens of thousands of settlers in 50 settlement villages. According to an informant, there have been various conflicts between the settlers and Shinasha as well as Gumuz residents in the area.

Sadly, all groups have used the settlers for political motives. The settlers' issue is very controversial and divisive in the regional state. With the intense ethnic rivalries among the indigenous elites, the

relationship between the indigenous and the settlers has been used for political purpose in exploiting their support to balance the political power of the rival ethnic group. This, in turn, has exposed the settlers for violence and atrocity from the other group. This is the case of the settlers in Assosa zone in which the Gumuz group are using them as a tool to promote their interest in order to weaken the power of the rival Benishangul group. In turn, the Benishangul group has felt that the settler, living in Benishangul delimited zonal area, are a threat to its ambition, and also its weakest point to be easily exploited by its rivals. Therefore, repeated aggression and abuse of their rights in daily bases have been a reality that the settlers have to live with.

The TPLF has also exploited the settlers' issues for its self-centred political game. From the start, the TPLF was in favour of the interests of the Benishangul group by disregarding the rights of the settlers. It appeared that it was also deliberately disregarding the cruelty of indigenous elites against the 'non-indigenous' community in the regional state. Because it could create a golden opportunity for it to attract members from the 'non-indigenous' group who may need a protection against a local despotism and extremism. According to a settler that in order to have a citizenry right and escape from mistreatments in the region, one has to become a member of the EPRDF. Here, the irony is that people seek shelter into the organisation that encouraged their marginalisation and discrimination; this may be a deliberate Machiavellian strategy of a minority rule that seeks followers by making them vulnerable and victims.

Conclusion

The pre-1991 ethnic tensions in Benishangul-Gumuz areas were limited to conflict between adjacent communities for various reasons of livelihood challenges and social facets such as land grapping, cattle raiding and cultural clashes. Very low intensity sporadic clashes used to occur between Gumuz and settlers in Metekele area and between Gumuz and Oromo in south part of the region. However the post-1991 ethnic tensions are very new and induced in connection with the establishment of the regional state government, as it has been manoeuvred by the TPLF. The prejudiced measures of the TPLF have been exacerbating divisions and hostilities that would have a long-term consequence to create a peaceful relation among the people in the region.

The usual tactic and obsession of the TPLF in imposing partisan and egocentric solutions did not convince the dissenting elites. As usual, the TPLF has been rewarding those who accept its solution and at the same time punishing those reject. However, neither the rewards, nor the punishments are good enough to create a badly needed cooperation and vitality in the regional state. Instead, it has exacerbated resentments and fury. Contrary to the official demagogy and deception, the regional state has remained very divided, inefficient and corrupt. In the third regular conference in 2002, the regional council promised to get rid of tribal, parochial and widespread corrupt practices in the regional government. The same promise was repeated in October 2005, as the problems have continued to be the major problems in the region (Ethiopian News Agency, October 25, 2005)

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