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Ethiopia: The Agony of Tribal Nationalism

In whatever form it manifests, whether it's distaste for foreigners, refugees and asylum seekers, a nationalistic economic policy or flag-waving patriotism, tribal nationalism is a cancer upon the world. Violent, ugly, and often deadly, it creates and strengthens divisions, often resulting in war, one after another after another throughout history.

Ethiopia is a land rich with ethnic diversity: Some 70 tribal groups live within this ancient nation, all with their own cultures, traditions, and dialects. Tolerance, understanding, and cooperation are essential within such a bountiful landscape.

Since 2018, when the repressive, TPLF-dominated EPRD regime was swept aside and the current government, led by Prime-minister Abiy Ahmed, took office, Ethiopia as an integrated stable nation has been under attack from tribal nationalists of one creed or another. Having forced the US-backed Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) terrorists to disarm, the threat facing the country now comes from extremists within the Oromo region: The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF); its armed wing the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA); the Qeerroo Oromo youth organization; sympathetic/coerced forces within the Oromo Regional Authority (ORA); radicalized elements within the district militia, the Oromo Special Forces (OSF); and many suspect, secessionist elements within the federal government itself.

This brutal coalition seems focused on eradicating the Amhara people from the Oromo region, reducing the overall Amhara population and forcing the creation of an Oromo Republic. They are engaged in a deadly campaign of destruction, threatening to tear the country apart, a project which by any definition qualifies as genocide.

Death, displacement and division

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A significant date in the campaign to purge Oromo of Amhara people is the Burayu Massacre of 14-16 September 2018, five months after PM Ahmed became prime-minister and invited exiled political groups to return to Ethiopia. Buoyed by the return of the OLF, a gaggle of Oromo thugs (including radicalized youth), under the banner of ‘Abe Torbee’ (People of the Weak), attacked Amhara people, property and businesses, killing, mainstream media reported, 23 people. Since then thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, have died; hundreds of thousands internally displaced – in a country with the highest number of displaced persons in Africa.

The UN estimate it to be around 5.5 million, but when many of those scattered are living not in organized UNHCR refugee camps, but in makeshift shelters, abandoned buildings or simply on the land, collating accurate statistics is virtually impossible. Suffice to say, huge numbers of men, women, and children, who were living simple, often grueling lives in rural/semi-rural Ethiopia, are destitute, traumatized, and frightened, as a result of the terrorist actions of either the OLF/OLA and associated gangs, or the TPLF.

Ethnic cleansing (a deeply repugnant, inflammatory term, like ‘genocide’) forms the cornerstone of a coordinated Oromo strategy aimed at igniting social unrest and institutional instability in which power becomes usurped, or consolidated. To this end, an assault was made on The Ethiopia Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) by Oromo nationalists on 22 January.

Three Orthodox bishops unilaterally declared the creation of the “Holy Synod of Oromia”; arguing that their decision was prompted by the failure of the EOTC to offer religious services in tribal languages. This is a hollow justification: EOTC priests routinely preach in regional languages and have always done so. To the dismay of many, the government in the form of PM Abiy, appeared to support the ‘rebel bishops’. Amhara Association of America (AAA), an Ethiopian NGO based in the US, is one of a growing number who believes the government was party to the action. In a statement, they condemned “in the strongest terms the Abiy Ahmed regime’s ongoing persecution of religious leaders and attempt to divide the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC).”

This attack, on the most trusted national institution, had nothing to do with the church, rather it is part of a political campaign to divide people along ethnic lines and control the populace by infiltrating the EOTC, which is a cornerstone of life for millions of Ethiopians. The ‘rebel bishops’ were swiftly excommunicated by the Tewahedo Church, and across the country hundreds of thousands of people united in solidarity with the EOTC.

Aggression and hatred

At the violent core of Oromo nationalism sits the OLF, regarded (erroneously) after their return to Ethiopia in 2018, as a legitimate political party, and the OLA, officially labelled as terrorists. The OLF and OLA are two arms of one entity united by a single ideology of aggression and hatred. Their primary goal, as spelt out on the OLF website is: “To lead the national liberation struggle of the Oromo people against the Abyssinian colonial rule [a ‘struggle’ that would not exist save for the OLF].....to exercise the Oromo peoples’ inalienable right to national self-determination to terminate a century of oppression and exploitation.” They talk a lot about the ‘empire state of Ethiopia’ (which they appear to associate with Amhara people), policies of ‘divide and rule’ and ‘oppressed people’.

Under the former TPLF-dominated EPRDF government, a brutally repressive dictatorship, the Oromo people, like many others, were cruelly persecuted and oppressed – see Amnesty International report. Anger (widespread among Ethiopians) towards the TPLF, would then be understandable. But far from attacking them, the OLF stood with the TPLF during its two year war (2020-2022) against the Ethiopian State, and is now carrying out ethnically driven atrocities, primarily (but not exclusively) against Amhara people.

These are civilians, not members of an ‘evil empire’, who are being killed and terrorized, their livestock slaughtered and homes destroyed: AAA estimates that in January alone “over 5,885 houses [in Sheger City on the outskirts of Addis Ababa] belonging to non-Oromo owners (mostly ethnic Amharas) were demolished,” resulting in tens of thousands of displaced Amharas. “The demolitions [which are ongoing] were carried out by a task force from the Sheger City administration (Oromia Regional State) in collaboration with Oromia Special Forces (OSF), Oromia police, and local Qeerro (ultranationalist Oromo youth). The Oromia Region security forces [OSF] were also implicated in various abuses against residents including arbitrary arrests and bodily injuries.” The targeted actions, the killings, the destruction of property and false arrests are carried out with total impunity.

Where is the federal government, a government which promised so much when it took office in 2018? Where it should be protecting the Amhara community, arresting those responsible for the killings and dismantling terror groups, it appears largely impotent, or worse, as a growing number of Ethiopians believe, is complicit. The regional authority, the ORA, is undeniably implicated, and this body is accountable to the federal government led by Ahmed.

Thus, criticism and suspicion of the government, PM Ahmed in particular, is mounting; ranging from allegations of direct involvement in the Oromo nationalists’ plan, to criminal

neglect; political weakness amid powerful Oromo voices (in the ORA and within the governing party); or total incompetence.

Accusations and mistrust that has been compounded in recent weeks by a series of repressive measures. In addition to the attempted church coup d'état, the regime has arbitrarily detained Ethiopian journalists/media workers, suspended media outlets, clamped-down on protests, arrested demonstrators and restricted access to social media; curtailed celebrations of Adwa (Ethiopia's victory over the Italians at the battle of Adwa 1 March 1896), a national moment of collective pride; and arrested anyone wearing t-shirts with the image of Menelik II, who was enthroned at the time of the battle. These restrictive acts hark back to the repressive TPLF-led regime (in power for 27 years), when human rights were utterly ignored and fear was widespread. Some dictatorships are born into tyranny, others slide into darkness one repressive act at a time, until one-day paranoia reigns.

The dark stain of duplicity

The first duty of government is to safeguard the populace. The Amhara people, persecuted on and off for generations, are being killed by terrorist gangs and radicalized Oromo groups including the OSF, and the Ahmed government is completely failing to protect them. More than that, by their inaction they are allowing the killings and demolitions to take place, day after day, week after week – giving the ethno-nationalists a green light for their barbarism.

Such criminal indifference by a government does indeed equate to complicity, and throws the light of suspicion directly on the PM. He doesn't visit IDCs to speak with victims or initiate investigations to establish what happened, fails to offer federal support, reparation and, crucially justice.

A recent incident demonstrates the prevailing attitude of the Ahmed regime to the murders and suffering of Amhara people: In the first week of February, the OLA attacked Amhara residents in an Internal Displacement Camp (IDC) in Anno town, East Wollega. AAA report that 41 people were killed by the terrorists and 12 left injured. At the same time the PM was in Europe visiting Heads of State in Italy and France, where he was filmed smiling happily as he sat in luxury, chatting. No mention was made in press statements or interviews of the murders that had occurred in his absence, or the ongoing ethnic slaughter. Why not? Safeguarding civilians under threat and hunting down perpetrators of mass killing/s should be his and his government's absolute priority.

A word one hears routinely applied to Ahmed is narcissist – is he more concerned with his international image than the lives of his fellow Ethiopians? Like many such ‘leaders’, no doubt he is focused on his ‘legacy’. Well, unless he acts swiftly and resolutely to the mass killings in Oromo a dark stain of duplicity, and potentially genocide, will run across any such bequest.

The Ethiopian government is not alone in ignoring and thereby facilitating the killing of Amhara people. From what I can see, there has not been a single statement of concern, condemnation or support from the ‘International Community’, i.e. America and her mates. All of whom, following the US lead, were quick enough to make one false accusation after another against the Ahmed government when the country was under attack from the US-backed TPLF. Now, when criticism and suspicion is warranted and a degree of external (diplomatic) involvement justified, urgently needed in fact, not a peep, from any government, Prime-Minister or President.

And barely a by-line in the corporate media, certainly nothing in the world’s loudest voices, the BBC and CNN. Following the lead of the US State Department, both institutions consistently spread propaganda and lies about the Ethiopian government during the TPLF-initiated war. Western governments (and media) approach to foreign affairs is largely dictated by US foreign policy, which is rooted in arrogance and paranoia, and is currently obsessed with Russia and China.

The US administration, the EU, UK etc., are certainly not concerned about the killing of thousands of Amhara people. Unless of course it results in the total destabilization of Ethiopia and an opportunity presents itself for US intervention. Until then, the position seems to be, let the killing continue, after all the victims of tribal hatred are only poor black Africans.

Neglect by the Ethiopian government, Ethiopia’s neighbours, global powers, and the African Union (where, at the recent AU summit, while talking about finding ‘African solutions to African problems, Ahmed shamefully failed to mention the Amhara’s plight/problem), which has also been deafeningly silent, in public at least, arms the gunmen; encourages jobs to smash and burn homes; gives no value to the lives of those men women and children being attacked, and thereby grants license to the terrorists to continue. Stand up, stand up all who are aware of this horror in our midst and demand that the Ethiopian government acts to stop the carnage.

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