

# THE DEMISE OF THE MYTHICAL ETHIOPIA

By Hamdesa Tusso

## The Two Ethiopias: The Mythical and the Real

There are at least two Ethiopias, one can argue: the mythical Ethiopia and the real Ethiopia. The attributes of the mythical Ethiopia are something like this: it is 3,000 years old, most of the citizens are Coptic Christians, and speak Amharic (the language of the Amhara), it is united, politically well developed, led by wise and modernizing emperors, it is a beacon of African independence and a leader in the decolonization of Africa. Since the 1974 Revolution, new attributes of the mythical Ethiopia have evolved. The conservatives in the west viewed Ethiopia as a Marxist-Leninist state which is stridently anti-west. Western progressives, on the other hand, saw the military regime in Addis Ababa as a true socialist government which introduced radical social transformation in order to overcome class oppression, poverty and backwardness.

The real Ethiopia, however, is strikingly different. It is a creation of the colonization process which was complete by the end of the early 20th century. The Amharas, who have ruled the Empire in alliance with Tigreans, are a minority estimated at fifteen percent of the population; the population which adheres to the Coptic Christian faith is a relative minority. The stunning military and political developments which took place so swiftly and definitively during the last week of May 1991 toppled the Marxist Government of Mengistu Haile Mariam and, more consequentially, demolished that mythical Ethiopia rather unmercifully.

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## The Exposition of the Real Ethiopia

The world began to learn more about the real Ethiopia at the London Peace Conference, May 27 and 28, which was a watershed in the political history of the Ethiopian Empire. Ethiopia arrived in four different pieces, so to speak:

First, the Dergue (then government in Addis Ababa) representing more or less the Amhara power; secondly, the Tigreans on the verge of dismantling the century-old Amhara supremacy and ascending to the pinnacle of power; thirdly, Eritrea, the junior and expendable territory acceded to the Italians by Emperor Menelik II, in 1889 and later on, incorporated to Ethiopia by Emperor Haile Selassie I under some shady political machinations with the support of the United States; and finally, the Oromo who have been the invisible majority in the raging conflicts in the Horn of Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular<sup>1</sup>.

The peace conference was chaired and heavily influenced by the present supreme Super Power, the United States, in the person of Mr. Herman Cohen, Under Secretary of State for African Affairs. The Soviet Union, which had functioned as the *deus ex machina* for the Addis Ababa government during the Ethiopia-Somalia Conflict (1977-1978) and subsequently provided the necessary weaponry and know-how, thus sustaining the life of the decaying empire, attended the London peace conference, only as an observer.

Originally, Mr. Cohen envisioned salvaging some elements from Mengistu's government which more or less represented the Amhara interest and then creating some kind of transitional coalition government with the three liberation fronts: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF),

Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPDRF), and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

Included in this frame of reference was the plan to call for a cease-fire, but fate turned out to be unkind to the Addis Ababa regime and more profoundly, to the century-old Amhara supremacy: Mengistu Haile Mariam having already fled to exile, and the military command and the government having collapsed so rapidly even before the London peace talks were formally to have commenced<sup>2</sup>.

On the evening of May 27, the Tigrean dominated EPRDF, supported by the EPLF military forces and management skills, marched into Addis Ababa and seized power without any significant resistance. This was endorsed by the American government, and Meles Zenawi, a Tigrean and leader of the TPLF/EPDRF, served as the head of interim government for the month of June.<sup>3</sup>

During the same week, EPLF marched into Asmara in military victory, realizing the goal the Eritrean nationalists have sought for thirty years through armed struggle, and subsequently formed an interim government in Eritrea.<sup>4</sup>

### Further Exposition of the Real Ethiopia

The second conference was convened in Addis Ababa July 1-5, as agreed upon at the London Peace Talks, to further negotiate on matters relating to the transitional government and beyond. This conference further revealed the nature of the real Ethiopia. Twenty-two nationality groups, social and political organizations were represented<sup>5</sup>. For the first time in the history of the Ethiopian Empire, the supremacy of the Amharic as the sole language of the government was challenged: Amharic and English were adopted as the languages of the conference, and the representatives of various nationalities either spoke in their own language with translation either to Amharic or English, or spoke in English<sup>6</sup>. The conference agreed to establish a

transitional government entrusted with the task of preparing a constitution for the first multi-party election in Ethiopian history and passed a charter of the transitional government. It was also agreed upon that the transitional government will be composed of two branches: the Council of Representatives and an independent Judiciary<sup>7</sup>.

The conference gave its approval for EPLF to conduct an internationally supervised referendum on independence of Eritrea<sup>8</sup>. The new charter also guarantees the right of nations and nationalities to self-determination, including independence upon their conclusion that their basic rights and interests can be better met outside of Ethiopia<sup>9</sup>.

### Inherent Problems in Democratizing Empires

In spite of these positive political developments, there are still some fundamental, intractable problems. Empires have, in their structure, super-ordinate and sub-ordinate relationships which in turn constitute obstacles to the implementation of reform and guaranteeing democracy and equality for the subjugated nationalities. In modern history, the cases of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, where in the face of social turbulence frantic and futile efforts were made to introduce reforms and save these empires from disintegrating, come to mind. Since the Eritreans have, *de facto*, already achieved independence, what will prevent other nationalities such as the Oromo - who have been more brutally colonized than the Eritreans (in sense of classical colonization) - from following the same route, i.e., pressing for the right to determine their own collective destiny. The future of the Ethiopian empire will hinge to a large extent on the conflicting aspirations of the two major nationalities, namely the Oromo and Tigreans. Of course the external world, particularly the United States and Western Europe, will have their influence.

The Oromo are the single largest ethnic group in the entire region who constitute more than half of

the population in contemporary Ethiopia. They are found in twelve out of fourteen provinces (now only thirteen provinces) and they are the majority in ten of them. They have been the targets of many oppressive policies and their culture has been desecrated and their language suppressed. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), now in coalition with three smaller Oromo organizations, has set its goal - the creation of independent Oromia.

The Tigreans, however, constitute about six percent of the population of Ethiopia; they belong to the Abyssinian community of the Shawa Amhara, Gondar, Gojjam and Tigray. These Abyssinian communities share some core values and experiences such as religion (the Christian Orthodox) language (both Amharic and Tigrinya derive from Geez), and all three claim the heritage of the Abyssinian civilization going back to the Axumite kingdom which included a sizable part of Eritrea. Also, the three groups (i.e. their elite) were the founders of the modern Ethiopian Empire, though the Shawa Amhara out manoeuvred the other two groups during the last century with respect to controlling the vital aspects of political power in the Empire.

### The Oromo Question and the OLF-TPLF/EPDRF Uneasy Relations

The current strained Tigray-Oromo relations in the post-Mengistu era stem from the following factors. To begin with, TPLF and OLF have held diametrically opposing positions with respect to the Oromo question. The OLF has stated that the Oromo issue is a colonial question and, as such, that decolonization is an essential step prior to any consideration of future Oromo affiliation with its neighbours<sup>10</sup>. The TPLF, on the other hand, has claimed that the Oromos have been dominated, not colonized, and therefore should join a united front with TPLF and its coalition organizations in democratizing Ethiopia<sup>11</sup>.

Secondly, upon failing to persuade the OLF leadership to accept this political goal, the TPLF organized the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) from Oromo soldiers it had captured in its armed-struggle against the Mengistu regime, with the prime goal of undermining OLF influence among the Oromo masses. The Oromo both in exile and at home, have rejected the OPDO dismissing it as the new Gobana (*Ras Gobana* was an Oromo credited for the conquest of the Oromo people by an Amhara ruler Emperor Menelik II toward the end of the 19th century)<sup>12</sup>. The fact that the Tigrean dominated EPDRF has assigned ten seats to OPDO - an organization which has been in existence for only about a year with very little grass root support from the Oromo intelligentsia and masses - has reinforced the suspicion that this was indeed a part of Tigrean political machinations to dilute the weight of Oromo influence in the new political order in Ethiopia.

Thirdly, the fact that the total number of seats allocated to Oromo organizations, including OPDO was only twenty-seven - way below the corresponding proportions to the Oromo population in the Empire - does not build Oromo confidence in the new political order.

Finally, to many people, EPDRF is a clone organization crafted imaginatively by TPLF to project the image of a multi-ethnic and multi-party umbrella organization to replace Amharas and rule Ethiopia. EPDRF was formed in 1989 by TPLF and the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM). Theoretically, the EPDRF has four movements: TPLF, EPDM, OPDO and EDOR (Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement); all of these have essentially been set up by TPLF. The organization itself is totally dominated by the Tigreans<sup>13</sup>. To many southern nationalities including the Oromo (the northern Abyssinian nationalities comprise about 70% of the total population in Ethiopia), this was *deja-vu* another Abyssinian master from the north, the α

founder of the Empire, manoeuvring current political events to replace Amhara domination.

### The Policies of World Powers and the Oromo Question

The United States, the Soviet Union and European governments' treatment of the political crisis in Ethiopia is anchored on two basic propositions. First, these governments in general hold a basic position with respect to ethnic demands for "secession" versus states' sovereignty and territorial claims. By and large, they oppose political movements with "secessionist" tendencies on the premise that "secession" would lead to disintegration of the concerned state and in turn would lead to the creation of many new smaller states with all the accompanying potential political problems giving rise to further regional and international conflicts.

Secondly, in the case of Ethiopia, the United States, Western European powers and the USSR have committed themselves to the notion of keeping it together, although more recently they have accepted rather reluctantly the EPLF demand to conduct an internationally supervised referendum on Eritrean independence. Since EPLF marched into Asmara with military victory there was very little that these governments could have done to alter the outcome.

The current political and financial support accorded to the Tigrean-dominated transitional government is based on the fact that the Tigreans as the co-founders of the Ethiopian empire, are committed to the political programs of keeping Ethiopia together. Of course, equally important was the fact that TPLF, in alliance with EPLF, acquired the military might to project this image during the final years of the Mengistu's regime. The United States and Western political leaders were motivated by their traditionally held view that the affairs of Ethiopia - the mythical Ethiopia - are better served under the rule of the Northern Christian elites - the

Amharas and Tigreans - than by the Cushitic Oromo<sup>14</sup>.

In conclusion, these factors pose formidable road blocks to the legitimate interests and aspirations of the Oromo people. The next two years, during which preparations will be launched for open and democratic elections as called for in the new charter, are going to be very critical in reconciling the incompatible goals and aspirations among the main actors in the Ethiopian political theatre.

### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Blaine Harden, "Ethiopian Cease Fire Puts Rebels in Control", *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, May 28, 1991, p. A1.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Post et al., "Cohen's Coup in Ethiopia?", *Newsweek*, June 10, 1991, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Kraus, "Ethiopia's Leader Agrees to Give Up Capital to Rebels", *The New York Times*, Tuesday, May 28, 1991, p. A1, and Gus Constantino, "Tigre Rebels at Reins in Talks", *The Washington Times*, Wednesday, June 26, 1991, p. A8.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Parnelle, "Battle Won, Eritrean Leader Dons a Tire and Talks of Democracy", *The Washington Post*, Saturday, August 17, 1991, p. A16.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Legum, "Ethiopia: Something of a Miracle", *Third World Reports*, (London), July 10, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> David Chazan, "Ethiopia's Acting President Accused of Censoring T.V. Reports", *AFP*, July 2, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia, *Negarit Gazette*, July 22, 1991, (Article Nine, # A-K).

<sup>8</sup> Marguerite Michaels, "Horn of Africa: Tough Terms for a Divorce", *Time Magazine*, July 15, 1991, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*; see also Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia, *Negarit Gazette*, opcit, (Article Two, # C).

<sup>10</sup> OLF Central Committee Statement, "Democratic Resolution of the Oromo National Liberation Struggle and of Other Conflicts in the Ethiopian Empire," April 15, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> TPLF Statement, "Communique on the Recent Declaration of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)", TPLF Information Center, (London), August 20, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> For Oromo grassroots reaction to TPLF/EPRDF and OPDO in Ethiopia, please see Robert M. Press, "In New Ethiopia Main Tribe takes Peaceful Route to Reclaim Rights", *The Christian Science Monitor*, Monday, July 15, 1991; The Reactions by Oromos in exile are represented by two position statements on the subject see, "Open Letter to the TPLF (EPRDF)" Oromo Community in Sweden, April 6, 1991; and "Position Statement of the Oromo Forum in Toronto on the Present Crisis in the Empire State of Ethiopia", May 5, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> *Africa Confidential*, "Ethiopia: From Rebels to Rulers", Vol. 32, (No. 11), May 31, 1991, p. 1-3.

<sup>14</sup> According to one reliable source, the CIA spent a lot of money in search of some type of non-Marxist liberation group(s) during

the 1980's whom it (CIA) could support against the Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

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## OROMO: THE ETHIOPIAN DILEMMA

by Teferi Fufa

On a sunny Friday morning in Khartoum, I attended a meeting of Oromo students and workers. The meeting was convened by the Oromo Relief Association (ORA). There was no big news; nothing to distribute or campaigns to raise funds for. There was no feast either. It was just a time to get together and talk with friends. Here in the West, the occasion would pass serve as group therapy except that the enormous bill from a specialist (therapist) would be missing after the session.

After taking a few pictures, I sat in and listened to what their meeting was all about. One by one they got up and recounted their stories of how they fled their country. One had been married but two weeks when he had to flee. Another was on his farm, working, when he heard they were coming for him. He had no time to go home to change clothing or to bid his family farewell. Yet another was away from his home town when he heard that his house has been ransacked and the search for him was still on. And the stories went on and on. As they talked and listened, the voices started to get louder exhibiting angry tones.

They discussed how life was in the foreign land. Some of them worked as labourers to make a living. Some of them did laundry and others cleaned houses. Many of them also carried Ethiopian travel documents sold to them by persons

from the Ethiopian consulate. Afraid that they would be deported if they did not carry these documents, they had decided to buy them (though they hated anything to do with Ethiopian papers). I am not sure if these papers were good for anything as they did not have corresponding Sudanese paper but I was not about to point this out and add to their worries. They were not happy with their work and their pay, but their anger was directed at the cause of their plight, not at their host country or employers.

### The Abyssinianized Oromos

"Look!" said one of them, "Look at me. Is there anything wrong with me?" He was really handsome man, and for a while I thought he was conscious of that. "I have two eyes and two ears," he continued. "I walk on my two feet just like the others do. What is it that made me flee?" They talked about the powerlessness of the Oromo under Abyssinian hegemony over them. "It is the educated Oromo", said another, "who became just like the (Abyssinians) and betrayed us." This gave me an opportunity to do a little bit of self-examination as I reflected on my role.

*I have always known that the enemy has made tools of its victims. But, I did not comprehend just how serious this was until that day I came back to the United States and started reading about our past history. I followed current events with much more interest. And I keep replaying the*

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