

Synopsis of Ethiopians Migration to the United States and Civic Engagement.

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The number of Ethiopian-Americans in the United States is growing steadily and they are making a meaningful economic contribution to the nation. However, the levels of Ethiopian-Americans civic engagements and the relevant mobilizing factors are not clearly understood. As a result, whether party identification or racial representation sways Ethiopian-American's voting patterns is yet to be looked at closely. Most importantly, the roles of the underlying historical migration factors of Ethiopian's and its ramification on their political engagement need further and detailed evaluations. This paper is intended to briefly introduce the underlying historical rationale of Ethiopian's migration to the United States and hope to shed some light about their civic engagement.

Although some Ethiopians have immigrated to the United States prior to the 1975 Ethiopian Revolution, mainly for higher educational attainment, an immigration exodus on a larger scale did not begin until the aftermath of 1975. According to recorded documents, in 1981 alone, three thousand Ethiopians found their way to the United States (Klein, Gil, 1982). Ethiopians begin to immigrate to the United States in large numbers mainly to escape

the brutal repression of the then military regime, which massacred the youth and the educated in large numbers.

In 1975, a group of military officers known as the "Derg" hijacked the most popular social movement the country ever saw. The movement intended to overthrow the monarchy that ruled the country for over four decades and aimed to introduce a democratic system of government in its place. Nonetheless, the Derg hijacked the movement to promote their own agenda and seize power. In the process, the Derg brutalized, imprisoned, and killed thousands of innocent people, especially those who were scholars and those who challenged the illegitimate seizure of power. To date, there are no precise statistical data on the total number of people who were gunned down by the brutal henchmen of the former military regime.

In the meantime, young university and high school students, professionals, unionized workers and the majority of the general public outside the inner circle of the Derg started to join the opposition camp in big numbers. The movement even included members of the armed forces that rose up against the military regime's brutality and the massacre that took place under the banners of the "Red Terror", which was imitated from the former Soviet Union despotic leader, Joseph Stalin's totalitarianism, which intended to the indiscriminate killings of those who opposed the regime one way or another.

The Red Terror was a violent political campaign, which took place in all regions of Ethiopia orchestrated by the pro pseudo “Communist Mengistu Haile Mariam,” the then brutal dictator (currently in exile and hiding in Harare, Zimbabwe), and which the regime used to exterminate and wipe out the popular movement members who were referred to by Derg as the “counter revolutionaries”.

In addition, to those condemned as counterrevolutionaries, the student union, various other civic organizations and their respective leaders subsequently joined the student’s movement and demanded the peaceful transfer of power from the military to the people. The students identified the main political and social ills of the nation and proposed their possible solutions. Some of their propositions were as follows; Land to the tiller, democracy now, free, fair and frequent elections and the establishments of a broad based inclusive transitional government.

Tragically though, the military regime chose to use an iron fist and attempted to crush the uprising by killing people indiscriminately instead of addressing the democratic and civic right issues raised by the people. Many people were thrown in jail and languished in horrifying and unbearable situations when they were not even part of the uprising. People who were suspected of having an opposition affiliation were killed in broad daylight without due process of law.

On the other hand, those who withered away in prison had to face extreme brutality and were arbitrarily tortured. Many more were tormented by extreme bodily pain and anguish. Their teeth and fingernails were pulled out and their bodies were burned with cigarette butts in torture chambers. Girls were gang raped by vicious and sadistic savages. Nevertheless, the spirits of the young students did not vacillate as the regime may have wished. Instead, the anguish forced them to explore other avenues to fight back to restore a rule of law and set up a democratic and vibrant society by sacrificing their dear lives.

Parents of the "Red Terror" victims were forced to pay for the bullets the regime had to use to take away the life of their loved ones. The victim's parents were also prohibited from grieving the passing of their children. Furthermore, parents fell under enormous amounts of violence and duress to join the "revolutionary local music bands" and were forced to perform and glorify the very "revolution" that took away the life of their loved ones. In addition, the regime unsuccessfully attempted to indoctrinate those who can fall in its crack. Cadres preached consistently by government controlled media outlets and condemned those who opposed the regime and categorized them as agents of a foreign power.

Moreover, the ideological conflict was so intense to the point where civil and democratic rights of citizens were seen as a bourgeoisie attribute by the regime. Anything and everything revolves around the regime's power.

The dergs simply perceive themselves as ordained by God, and unalterable leaders to protect and preserve the people's national interest. Freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, civil rights, and all those known inalienable natural rights of citizens taken for granted in every democratic society, became out of reach. Uneducated groups of military officers designated themselves as judges and jurors in every social and political sector. Extraordinarily difficult administrative and political barriers were put in place to make life hard and unbearable. Fear, mistrust, abuse, and excruciatingly painful deceit reined.

No one was spared from becoming the targets of the brutal regime. Even religious leaders were forced to advocate in favor of the regime, those who refuse to collaborate with the regime due to their religious values were exterminated and their brutally tortured and decapitated bodies were thrown into mass graves. Religious sacred places that traditionally have had immunity from arbitrary search by law enforcement agencies were grossly violated.

To make things worse, no one was allowed to leave the country with the exception of the regime's cadres who often traveled to the then East Germany and the former Soviet Union to acquire political indoctrination. The once proud and patriotic Ethiopians were forced to make hard choices. Thus, either to subdue their fear and join the struggle to vanquish the tyranny of homegrown brutal dictators or accept the situation for what it was.

Afterwards, investment properties and privately owned mid-size and large business were nationalized by the regime. The once affluent and vibrant business community was turned into a class of penniless beggars in a very short time and was forced to live in poverty. Furthermore, former business owner was categorized as agents of capitalism and were seen as threats to the regime. Private business was stifled and people were forced to buy their daily food supplies from a government-owned ration sub-stations. A centralized, command economy emulated from the former Soviet Union was implemented as the only solution.

Exhausting all the legal and peaceful avenues, students and most Ethiopians did not have any alternatives other than confronting the regime by armed insurgency. Many voluntarily dropped out of school, and many more abandoned their jobs and their families to join the struggle against the tyranny imposed on the people. Many sacrificed their lives while struggling for equality and justice; many more were forced to live in a harsh and onerous situation away from the luxury of the city life and the comfort of their family.

On the other hand, the military regime strengthened its military muscle by receiving both technical and logistic support from the former Soviet Union and its allies to crush the insurgency. Over time, the regime succeeded in creating division among the once cohesive and unified freedom fighters. Many ended up surrendering to the regime and start serving the

regime they fought against, while some decided to leave the country entirely and seek refuge in the neighboring countries, and subsequently emigrated to various European and The United States.

The post-revolution Ethiopian refugees had to travel a very risky, harsh and inhospitable long journey on foot to reach the boundaries of the neighboring countries such as the Republic of Sudan to subsequently make it to the United States and other countries (Koehn, Peter 1991). These refugees had to pay fees for their guides who lead them through the rough terrains and jungle. If seen by the government troops on reconnaissance, they will be shot at indiscriminately. If they happen to be captured by the government militia or the regular military forces, they will face execution on the scene without due process of law. They will also endure the brazen acts of robbery and violence from the guides themselves. Young girls were raped and at times taken for a wife by the bandits and by people who work for the guides and the guides themselves. If they survive the perilous unsparing long journey and make it to the neighboring countries, such as the Sudan and Djibouti, they will embark on the genesis of a second struggle in their host country.

It was therefore the victims of the "Red Terror" who left the struggle and chose to seek refuge in the neighboring countries that ended up immigrating to the United States back in the early 1980s. Most of those early immigrants did not know what to expect from their host country. In

fact, some expected to repatriate back to Ethiopia in due time. Their relationships with their family members from Ethiopia were minimal to nonexistent. Because they were classified as traitors and agents of foreign powers by the Ethiopian dictatorial regime, they were not allowed to visit their homeland. Gradually, they established their way and started accepting the reality for what it was and began to integrate themselves in their new society. Many started attending school, many more started working and subsequently became citizens.

According to the United States Census Bureau's most recent report, the overall population of African immigrants is growing rapidly. In 1970, the total numbers of African immigrants in the United States were only 80,000. However, the number has increased enormously throughout the durations of the last fifty years. The most recent study conducted between 2008 and 2012 shows that African immigrants account for 4 percent of the total United States population and grows up to 1.6 million. Moreover, no particular country of origin is found to represent a majority. Nonetheless, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Ghana make up forty-one percent of African-born total immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Undoubtedly, Ethiopians and Ethiopian-Americans in the United States are among the largest immigrant groups from the African continent. Among African refugees who were allowed to resettle in the United States in 1982, Ethiopians comprised 85 percent (Klein, Gil, 1982). Ethiopian immigrants are

also comprised of a goal-oriented and most productive workforce. Improved and enhanced political participation of this fastest growing ethnic group is important to the people who ran for the public office. Mesmerizing Ethiopian-Americans and earning their votes can play a role in benefiting the political parties.

To date, there are no accurate statistical data about the total numbers of people from Ethiopian origin and Ethiopian-Americans who live in the United States. However, the 2010 American Community Survey estimates the number to reach up to 173, 592; even though the figure seems unbelievably smaller than the common knowledge in the Ethiopian-American community suggests. Nonetheless, this number does not include those who were born in the United States (American Immigration Council, 2010). The Bay Area is among the highly Ethiopian population concentrated region next to that of Washington, District of Columbia, and Los Angeles, California.

Nevertheless, no known person of Ethiopian origin neither held nor ran for a prominent public office in California. Since the number of Ethiopian Americans in California and other states are increasing steadily, their meaningful participation in the political process is critical. California, the most diverse state in the United States, where one in four is now an immigrant (Lam, Andrew, 2010) needs to understand its immigrant population in all its complexity. The state is now home to various foreign-born and second generation state and local officials. Among other local

officials, the Mayor of San Francisco, Mayor Edwin Lee, the former Mayor of Oakland, Mayor Jean Quan, and the Mayor of Milpitas, Jose Esteves are among the notables even though the list can get longer. Nevertheless, even in a very accepting and diverse state like California, no known person from Ethiopian origin has ran for a public office.

To date, the only Ethiopian-American known to ran for a prominent political office in the US is Professor Mohammed Tahiro of Texas. According to his election campaign website, Professor Tahiro was born in Ethiopia and was forced to leave the country due to a political upheaval in his homeland. Professor Tahiro emigrated to the United States in 1989 and have lived in Minneapolis until he moved to Northern Texas with his family. Professor Tahiro who ran for the US Senate seat in 2014 is an Associate Professor of Economics at Collin College in Plano, Texas. During his campaign, Tahiro claimed that the tolerant US foreign policy was found ineffective. He then advocated for stronger military and aggressive foreign policy to protect the United States national interest around the world (<http://www.tahiro2014.org/>).

Ethiopian-Americans will benefit from being engaged in the political process. As decisions made by politicians have a direct effect on their lives and determine their future, it will be crucial to participate in the political process so that they can make their voices heard on various political, economic, and social issues and able to withhold and give their votes to the

best candidates, which will serve their interests. After all, democracy is said not to thrive without active participation of the people. It will be crucial for all segments of the society, including Ethiopian-Americans to involve and play an active role in the political process. It is palpable to postulate that better mobilization and an active participation would gradually bear fruits and opens a door of opportunity to grant the demands thereof.

It is true that the Ethiopians had endured and go through a horrendous political violence, treacherous murder and traumatic situations, and some may disengage themselves from political activities and limit themselves within their personal lives and choose to stay away from public affairs entirely. However, there is no adequate evidence to confirm that the political parties have done enough to engage and create a rudimentary bond with that of the people from Ethiopian communities across the country.

Various studies have confirmed that the minority ethnic groups in the United States have minimal political participation and they are not given the attention they deserve across the board. For instance, in the State of California, the number of Latino voters is much lower than that of Caucasians. According to the 2014 Public Policy Institute of California's survey, In California, 62 Percent of the likely voters are white, while the number of Latino voters is only 17 percent (Baldassare, Mark, 2014). The low political participation of Latino voters is not a mere product of political

apathy; in fact, it illustrates the failures of both political parties to engage and accommodate the Latino voters.

Similarly, educational attainment and socioeconomic status are predictors of political participation in the United States political landscape. Studies confirmed that college educated Americans tend to be more engaged not only in election processes, but also exhibits a deviation to actively involve in political activities such as participating in campaign efforts, and in making financial contributions to the political parties and candidates of their preference. (Flanigan, Zingale, Theiss-Morse, Wagner, 2014).

As an illustration, according to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau report, African immigrants have higher educational attainment compared with the overall immigrants in the United States. Between 2008-2012, over forty-one percent of African immigrants had a bachelor degree or higher. During the same period, over 26 percent of Ethiopian-Americans are known to have a bachelor or postgraduate degree. The report also indicated that over 59 percent of Ethiopian immigrants are either a high school graduate or attended some college level education (US Census Bureau, 2010). In addition, immigrants are expected to acquire adequate civic knowledge in order to pass the citizenship eligibility test and become a US citizen. Therefore, Ethiopian-Americans clearly have a distinctive understanding of the United States political landscape to actively take part in the political process.

In the 2008 presidential election, Ethiopian-Americans are believed to have voted in huge numbers for President Barack Obama. Ethiopians of all ages, both men and women, embraced the president's message of an optimistic future and the messages of a dream for a better life and new opportunity. Like all Americans, Ethiopians have a desire to transform the political discourse that polarized communities into one that embraces the difference as a precursor of unity and national strength. The president's charismatic persona and eloquent rhetorical aptitude are also assumed to play a role in appealing to the Ethiopian-American electorate. Those Ethiopian-Americans who voted in the 2008 presidential election feel compelled to contribute their part to make a profound change in the United States political culture and elect the first African American president. Nevertheless, most of Ethiopian-Americans believe that their voting patterns are less likely to be affected by the candidate's race and ethnicity. The majority of Ethiopian-Americans, however, are believed to favor Democrats over Republicans.

Similarly, In the 2014 San Jose mayoral race, Ethiopian-American political participation was at a significantly higher proportion than to their numbers. In the San Jose mayoral race, Ethiopian American's political participation was not limited to casting their votes. They were also actively engaged in the campaign efforts. The elected mayor, Sam Liccardo, already had a well established relationship with the Ethiopian community, and he

was endorsed by an Ethiopian advocacy group known as the Ethiopian American Council. Members of the Ethiopian community and Ethiopian activist volunteers were also participating in door-to-door canvassing, in distributing leaflets, in making financial contributions, and in working phone banks to increase turnout. Given the overall low turnout of the election, Ethiopian-American's contribution played a key role in Mayor Sam Liccardo's successful election campaign.

Ethiopian-Americans have a great pride in their heritage and culture. Most importantly, the centuries old tricolor Ethiopian flag has a sentimental and special importance to them. Therefore, that is why the Ethiopian community that resides in and around the Bay Area gathers every year to raise the tricolor flag in front of the San Jose City Hall. The Flag raising ceremony in San Jose was taking place for the last several years in which the community is grateful of the former San Jose Mayor, Chuck Reed and other city officials. Notably, as a former city Council member, Sam Liccardo played a significant role in making this meaningful ceremony happen, which indebted him from the Ethiopian community. The flag raising ceremony that takes place in September for the last several years is historical in nature and creates a sense of closure to Ethiopian heritage. City officials, clergies of the prestigious Mekane Rama Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Muslim Association, members of the Ethiopian community and friends of Ethiopians usually devote their time to attend the event.

Consequently, Ethiopian-Americans are expecting to see Sam Liccardo and the City government take a meaningful measure to bridge the gaps and empower various disadvantaged communities. Ethiopian-Americans want to see their qualified community members becoming police officers, social workers, city employees and yes, they want to be represented in the local government structures. Furthermore, The Ethiopian Community Service Center, which suppose to provide social and educational services to the Ethiopian community is almost dysfunctional for lack of funds and adequate resources. The Ethiopian Community Service is a non-profit organization that assists Ethiopian refugees and immigrants in Santa Clara County by providing various services such as counselling, summer programs for youth, health conferences, and computer training to those who are in need. The Ethiopian Community Service center should get the much needed resources in order to function effectively.

Simultaneously, Ethiopian-Americans in the Bay Area are making a meaningful contribution to the economy and serving the public in various capacities. Various Ethiopian restaurants are providing their unique, enticing, and meticulously prepared Ethiopian food to the San Jose, and nearby communities. These restaurants are also playing a role in introducing Ethiopian indigenous food and culture to people from different walk of life and cultural background. Ethiopian professionals, courteous and friendly Taxicab drivers are known for their elegant physique and their diligence and

outstanding services. Ethiopians are also known for their industrious work ethics and their harmonious and respectful manner.

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