

The Great Illusion Part III

Isaias Afwerki and Ethnic Fundamentalism

By

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In the previous section I have tried to show how Isaias' short-term and long-term objectives are incompatible with the struggle for democracy and national unity in Ethiopia. In this section, I will briefly discuss how he uses ethnic fundamentalism to weaken Ethiopia.

The Isaias Model of Destabilizing Ethiopia

To realize the long-term objective of developing Eritrea, as discussed earlier, the EPLF requires a politically enfeebled Ethiopia, in the form of mini states or a dependent client state. To that end it has used a successful formula, as enunciated by Isaias during the interview, comprising the elements "*awareness, organization, and action*".

Since the formula has been successfully applied by the EPLF, we can call it the *Isaias model* of destabilizing Ethiopia. However, for the political formula to be effective, it needs an ideological framework.

Ethnic Fundamentalism as an Ideology

Ideology has been defined as a system of beliefs used to perceive, understand, and interpret the world. Ideology rationalizes, justifies, and sanctions actions taken by individuals and political groups. Isaias boasts that he does not subscribe to any ideology, but prefers a potpourri of values from different ideologies. I guess he wants to portray himself as a non-ideological, pragmatic leader.

His claims notwithstanding, he has been practising authoritarianism, militarism, and what a colleague calls "**ethnic fundamentalism**", a blunt instrument used for creating ethnic discord, ethnic hatred, and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. What is ethnic fundamentalism?

If religious fundamentalism is a strict interpretation of religious text, ethnic fundamentalism is a strict interpretation of history, politics, art, and culture with an ethnic perspective. Just like any ideology, it permeates the social, political, and personal realms. It provides the lens through which everything is seen. Isaias has successfully used ethnic fundamentalism to destabilize Ethiopia.

Element # 1: “Ethnic Awareness”

In a multi-ethnic country like Ethiopia, the heritage, culture, and language of each ethnic group should be respected and promoted, within a united Ethiopia. It is clear that the previous governments have miserably failed in this regard. And it is this failure that ethnic fundamentalists have exploited fully.

At the same time, the economic well-being of all Ethiopians, irrespective of their ethnicity, including the “privileged Amharas” under the previous regimes and the “favoured Tigrayans” under the current regime, has suffered.

Ethnic fundamentalism, instead of examining the social, economic, and political problems facing the Ethiopian people systemically, analyzes them ethnically, classifying one ethnic group as the perpetrator and the other ethnic group as the victim. An ethnic group become the oppressor, not the rulers.

This formulation leads to exploiting the basest of human emotions; it drives a wedge between the population, creating a mentality of “us” and “them”. All the “us” is assigned positive traits, all the “them” negative traits.

For an ethnic fundamentalist, the universal problems most Ethiopians face—abject poverty, oppression, and lack of adequate services (health care and education)—become particularized. The problems facing Ethiopians are understood as being ethnic, not systemic. The ethnic framing of economic, social, and political problems invariably results in blaming an entire ethnic group for the problems. In the past, it was the Amharas; today, it is the Tigrayans.

There is a natural tendency for humans to gravitate towards one's ethnic group, towards one's common ancestry, language, and territory, to exhibit what Anthony Smith, the renowned scholar on nationalism, calls "primordial nationalism". It is this natural tendency that the EPLF and the TPLF have exploited to the fullest. This also explains in part why the EPRP failed and the TPLF triumphed.

Ethnicized Propaganda

In the Isaias model, raising "awareness" translates itself into ethnicized propaganda work, the kind of propaganda the EPLF has been utilising since its inception to undercut national unity. Today, the EPLF uses its state-owned media for the same purpose, under the guise of opposing the TPLF-controlled regime. Eritrea's Ministry of Information broadcasts in Amharic, Afan Oromo, and Somali languages with contradictory messages about national unity. The Amharic program presents news and views from an Ethiopian perspective, but the Oromo and Somali programs spread an anti-Ethiopian, separatist agenda.

A sub-set of "ethnic awareness" comprises an assault on shared history, experience, culture, and value to destroy Ethiopian national identity. (I may explore this later)

Element # 2: Ethnic Organizations

Isaias tells the two interviewers that he is concerned about national unity in Ethiopia. This is an outright falsehood. As stated earlier, Eritrea's long-term goal of industrialization, the EPLF is persuaded, demands a politically fragmented Ethiopia. To achieve its strategic objective, the EPLF needs ethnic political organizations that fight for the separation.

When asked about his regime creating ethnic groups to fight the regime in Ethiopia, he retorted that, "... *we don't create organizations in Ethiopia*", claiming that the political reality results in the kind of political organizations that have emerged in Ethiopia. This is partly true.

But the political landscape in Ethiopia has been configured to a large extent by what the EPLF has undertaken in Ethiopia over the last 40 years, including its assistance to, if not the

direct creation of, so many “liberation fronts” in Ethiopia. Besides, the political situation does not favour the creation of only ethnic organizations.

Last Name: “Liberation Front”

Despite his denial, the EPLF has played a significant role in the proliferation of ethnic political organizations in Ethiopia. The EPLF has been inspirational, instrumental, and influential in the creation of ethnic organizations.

Emulating the nomenclature of liberation fronts that fought against European colonialism in Africa, the EPLF (and later the TPLF) has assisted in the creation of numerous ethnic organizations whose names end with... Liberation Front. You can fill in the name of any ethnic group, and you will have an ethnic organization created in the image of the EPLF. The labelling of ethnic groups as liberation fronts is not accidental; it is a deliberate attempt to portray their struggle is also an anti-colonial struggle in Ethiopia.

Ever since the EPLF trained the fighters, cadres, and leaders of the TPLF, the latter has excelled in applying the Isaias’ model. We can say that the TPLF was the first real convert to the Isaias’ ideology of ethnic fundamentalism, but it has become more catholic than the pope.

Element # 3: Military Action

The third element of the Isaias’ model, as he expounded during the interview, involves military action. Military action does not target just the oppressive apparatus of the regime, but also anyone who challenges the leadership of the ethnic organization, including internal “informants, collaborators, and traitors”. The target may also include the civilian population of the “oppressor” ethnic group.

Ethnic fundamentalism, like religious fundamentalism, treats innocent individuals in the out-group as non-humans whose life is immaterial. This explains the atrocities committed against ordinary Amharas, Oromos, Somalis, Gambellas and other groups over the last 25 years.

Great leaders and small-minded leaders

In politics, to galvanize the population, it is much easier to appeal to ethnic solidarity, ethnic pride, or ethnic injustice—the ethnic fundamentalist approach—than to mobilize the people for the ideals of democracy, freedom, human rights, or civil liberties—the civic approach.

The ethnic fundamentalist approach focuses on a specific ethnic group, the civic approach on all citizens of a country. The first is narrow, biased, and exclusive; the second universal, impartial, and inclusive. The first appeals to individuals as members of an ethnic group, the second as members of humanity.

Great leaders with vision inspire people to unite across ethnic, religious, and regional boundaries for a common cause; small-minded leaders with no vision divide people along ethnic, religious, and regional lines for their political ends.

Great leaders appeal to our better angels; small-minded leaders stoke our worst demons. At this critical juncture of its history, what Ethiopia needs is a great visionary leader.

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