

The Perils of Ethnic Federalism

Part IV: The Tragedy of the Killils

By

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History shows that when different ethnic groups live together in a region, as has happened in Ethiopia for centuries, the close social interaction promotes mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance. The long history of co-existence explains the relatively low level of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia, in spite of a hyper-ethnicized political atmosphere over the last 25 years. The mutual tolerance that the Ethiopian people have exhibited for one another bodes well for national unity, but one should not underestimate the damage inflicted on the Ethiopian body politic by the introduction of ethnic federalism. Ethnic federalism, as I have argued in my previous instalments, has created ethnic cleavage, discord, and hostility unprecedented in Ethiopian history. In this section, I will demonstrate how it has prevented lasting cooperation between political parties.

Attempts at Explaining Non-cooperation

Ever since the unrest in Oromia exploded, some commentators have lamented the dearth of solidarity with the Oromo people. They attribute it to three main factors: the lack of information, fear of repression, or the lack of moral courage. The lack-of-information argument is untenable. Surely, non-Oromo students at Jimma University do not lack information about what is happening in Oromia. When Oromo students at the university express their solidarity with Oromo farmers by not eating their meals and the non-Oromo students refuse to cooperate, it is not because the latter are unaware of what is taking place. (When I was a student at Haile Selassie University, we sent our meals to the victims of famine in Tigray and Wollo, without any distinction to ethnicity. How far have we regressed!)

When a society's youth, the conveyors of idealism, the paragons of dedication, the models of self-sacrifice, appears indifferent to the injustice committed in front its eyes, we have cause for concern. Indeed, it is a tragedy.

It may appear that the regime's repression may have discouraged people in the other killils from expressing their solidarity with the Oromo people, but if the Ethiopian people are so frightened of the regime, how do we explain the current strike by owners and operators of commercial vehicles in many cities, across different killils? Nor does fear explain the low level of participation by non-Oromos

in the Diaspora in the demonstration against the killings in Oromia. Fear is not the factor.

Other commentators have attributed the lack of solidarity to the absence of moral fortitude among non-Oromos, especially among the Amharas, but this argument suffers from at least two defects. First, it is wrong to blame an entire ethnic group for moral failing; if there is any moral culpability, it should be directed at the system and the political leadership. Second, it is not moral ineptitude that has prevented people from expressing their solidarity.

Some people have assigned a selfish motive to expressing solidarity with the Oromo people. They argue that non-Oromos should express their moral indignation out of sheer self-interest. Today, the victims are the Oromos; tomorrow, it may be your ethnic group. Solidarity is thus seen as a transactional activity, a form of self-defence mechanism. However, the self-interest argument lacks moral foundation. We should oppose injustice, wherever it occurs because it is morally wrong. Period.

The Killilization of the Ethiopian Mind

The absence of widespread solidarity with the Oromo people does not reflect the lack of information, courage, or moral fortitude. Rather, it reveals the emotional distance from, the feeling of indifference to, and the fear of the “other” created by killil. A killilized administrative division of Ethiopians has created an equally killilized mindset. For example, when a prominent member of the Oromo Diaspora leads a demonstration demanding “Ethiopia out of Oromia”, the slogan reflects a killilized mind and feeds the concerns, fears, and anxieties of the killilized mind of the ethnic “other”, a tragedy manufactured by ethnicized politics. A killilized mind tragically hinders unity of purpose.

The lack of cooperation among the various political groups is a serious obstacle to achieving a common national goal. Below, I will outline the theoretical framework for explaining non-participation for attaining a common objective.

The Problem of Collective Action

Economists and other social scientists have studied the problem of collective action, the non-participation of some individuals in attaining a common goal. The discussions on the collective-action problem provide useful insights into understanding the absence of widespread support for the Oromo people.

It is hypothesized that the chances of cooperation for collective action improve when individuals face the same conditions and share the same objectives. If, on the

other hand, individuals face different circumstances or have different goals, the chances of cooperation diminish. Or if individuals believe that the costs of participating are too high, they will refrain from participating.

Or if people are convinced that they can enjoy the benefits of the outcome without incurring any costs—the free-rider argument—they will refrain from participating. Lastly, if individuals have antagonistic goals, then there is no room for cooperation. The collective-action problem framework best explains the lack of widespread support for the Oromo people among members of the other ethnic groups.

Differentiated Repression and Differentiated Responses

Not all ethnic groups face the same level of repression in Ethiopia, as befits divisive ethnic politics. The regime imposes differentiated repression on different ethnic groups, resulting in differentiated responses. Second, ethnic federalism has created differentiated goals for the political elite. It has empowered ethnic political leaders who comfortably inhabit the killils, physically or ideologically, to spawn differentiated objectives, varying from advancing personal interests, to harbouring an ambiguous stance on democracy, to entertaining lukewarm attitude toward national unity, to advocating secession overtly and covertly.

Third, the spread of ethnicism has differentiated the Ethiopian people along ethnic lines. As a result, empathy, sympathy, solidarity, and cooperation have become bifurcated along ethnic lines, sometimes even along regions within the same ethnic group. This is tragic.

Thus, the combination of differentiated repression, resulting in differentiated responses, differentiated goals, and differentiated political actors; a killilized political framework and pervasive ethnicism explain the non-cooperation of opposition political groups over the last 25 years. The Ethiopian people have been sufficiently heterogenized by these factors that cooperation has been severely undermined. The realization of this fact is paramount when formulating a common objective, defining tactical and strategic modalities, and forming principled alliances.

Thinking beyond the Killils: A United and Democratic Ethiopia

From the analysis above, it is tempting to conclude that cooperation among political parties for a common national goal is unattainable. That is the wrong conclusion. The obstacles to cooperation for the common objective of advancing democracy in a united Ethiopia are daunting, but they are not insurmountable. Any tactical alliance without an agreement on the common objective will fail, as will atomized ethnic-

based struggles.

Some people have argued that it is impossible to reform ethnic federalism, to discard ethnic politics, to abolish ethnocentrism, or to change ethnic political parties. This is a fatalistic position. They argue that we have to be careful not to upset the status quo, but political transformation is exactly what Ethiopia needs today. The question is not whether political change will occur or not; Ethiopia is already on the cusp of a major political change because of systemic contradictions. The question is what kind of change.

No political system is immune from change, least of all an authoritarian system. Ethnic federalism is not immutable. There is nothing natural, inexorable, or permanent about it. It was established by politicians and it can be transformed by politicians. Just as it was created to serve the political interests of the EPLF, OLF, and TPLF, it can be replaced by democratic federalism to serve the interests of all Ethiopians.

To effect the needed politically change, political parties, both within the EPRDF and the opposition, need to de-killilize their political platforms to encompass the larger killil: Ethiopia. This may not be an easy task, but that is the only solution to the political conundrum facing Ethiopia today. The opposition parties should recognize that the struggle for equality, justice, and peace calls for principled cooperation on advancing democracy in a united Ethiopia. It is only then that the particular demands of the Oromo farmers can be satisfactorily addressed peacefully.

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