

# Bridging the Unchained Triangular Political Thinking in Ethiopia

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Until recently, the political thinking in Ethiopia was polarized between assimilationists and pluralists block. These two blocks have different perspectives on the narration of the making of Ethiopia, the conception of ethnic identity, relation between ethnic and religious identities, the theory of *Ethiopianness* and the overall history of the country. They have diverse images about friends and enemies, heroes and *bandas* (internal traitors) of Ethiopia. In the post-Derg era, the second block, sympathisers of multiculturalism, are able to control the Ethiopian political scene and transform a century old unitary administrative system into a new decentralized administration structure that is based on the ethno-linguistic heterogeneity of the country. Those in the first block severely criticized the ethnic federalism arrangement by claiming that it is ‘a threat for the unity and survival of the country’. Whereas, the counters argued the policy of ‘unity-in-diversity’ rather circumvent Ethiopia that was ‘ripe for disintegration and fragmentation’ at the time they took control of the power in early 1990s. Sympathisers of this block go far to justify and convince Eritrea’s secession as a scenario that ‘avoids further fragmentation of Ethiopia into pieces’. Nonetheless, after some years of the implementation of ethnic federalism, the second block seem to lose sympathisers of multiculturalism who strongly criticized the ‘façade practice of federalism’, which later led to the inception of a third block in the political thinking of the country. This block acknowledges the ethnic federalism as a response for the question of nationalities in Ethiopia but claims that it falls short of exercising genuine self-rule. Some elites in the third block further admit that an extreme manipulation of ethnic politics in the current federal arrangement may turn out to be a danger for unity of Ethiopia. Accordingly, the political thinking among citizens of the country stretched into a triangular shaped blocks where the three vertices seem to keep in their corners with a very little level of understanding among each other. Even though, the political process for bridging these triangular thinking seems to go encouragingly forward in one time and goes backward wretchedly in the other, mutual understandings and compromising of political thinking need much more time yet. These three political thinking in Ethiopia, have got little opportunities to be discussed, brainstormed, negotiated and compromised by the political elites of each blocks in order to guarantee a better and all accommodating Ethiopia. Rather the gap is widening and each block advocates its own interest by giving a blind eye to the claim of others. Particularly, the Ethiopian diaspora politics appear to be infected with the ‘only our cause’ blind eye politics in which one could automatically be labelled as ‘*chauvinist Amhara*’ if s/he raise the issue of great Ethiopia. Similarly, daring to talk about ethnic right and past historical trajectories would lead for labelling the person as ‘*narrow nationalist*’ or else *woyane*’, though the person is against the TPLF/EPRDF rule. The political leaders in all corners seem to be less successful in bridging these gaps. Nowadays, electoral politics appear to be the sole force that drives political leaders from the three blocks to gather around a table. The emotional discussions, ad-hoc coalitions, joint press releases, repressions and harassments that come to pass in every five years could neither bring democratic transformation nor guarantee sustainable peaceful co-existence among citizens of the country. Each group should better understand what the other group opt for. What does ethnic right really mean for each group? Which Ethiopia are they talking about? Do they think eliminating TPLF from power guarantees the well being and co-existence between all Ethiopian people? Likewise, is the coming of the oppositions in power really mean back to the past? In order to enable us to stand above our fears, assumptions, and prejudices, So many related issues

should be assessed by politicians as well as all stakeholders concerned about the fate of Ethiopia. This paper attempts to briefly look at the unchained triangular political thinking entertaining today's Ethiopian politics.

### ***Vertex 1 - 'One People, One History, One Country'***

This corner is comprised of groups who admire those 'good old days' and strongly believe on the mythological and religious stories since the era of Axumite. This group is very proud of the legendary Queen Saba of Ethiopia crossing the Red Sea to meet King Solomon of Israel. Returning home, Saba conceived and bore a son, the first Emperor, Menilek I, through whom all Ethiopian emperors claimed descent from king Solomon and thus justified their dynasty as 'Lion of the Tribe of Judah and Elect of God.' According to sympathizers of this block, the great Axumite kingdom (ancient kingdom of Abyssinia) and the biblical Ethiopia are analogous to today's Ethiopia. In this vertex, Orthodox Church is regarded not only as symbol of heritage and history but also as the sole protector of Ethiopian sovereignty. And hence, any threat to the Orthodox Church is considered as threat to Ethiopia as well. The forty years of rule by the non-Christian (Sidama or Jewish) Queen Yodit and over a decade rule of Ahmed Gragn are yet considered as historical debacles. Even over a century rule of the Agew people, Zagwe dynasty is considered as usurpers. Emperor Susneyos, (who's mother's belly was 'massaged with the chaff of Teff grain dipped in water in order to make the baby to be born blind') forced down from his throne for his non-Amhara blood and closeness to Catholic missionaries is yet recognized by many sympathisers in this block as a threat to the dignity of the church and hence the country too.

According to the perception in this block, territory of today's Ethiopia was large that included today's Al-Shebab's shore in Somalia, Yemen, Sudan up to the land of Aswanis in the southern portion of Egypt. Therefore, Menelik's remaking of the modern Ethiopia is the unfinished mission that fails to incorporate the lost territories in Benadir (Mogadishu), Yemen, Sudan and the Lower Egypt. In this corner of the triangular political thinking, the age-old relationships between several ethnic and religious groups in Ethiopia are indications of tolerance. According to elites in this block, even though Muslim and Jewish communities were denied access to the main resource of production, a land, the 7<sup>th</sup> century great hospitality of the Axum king to the refugees from Mecca was suffice indication for the mutual respect and co-existence of religions in the country. Massive incursions and settlements in the Oromo land and southern portion of the country is considered as a 'march to enlighten primitive societies and transfer civilization to the pagan others.' Eventually, the culture, religion and attitudes of the elites cornered in this vertex seem to convince themselves that these identities are fundamental symbols of being a 'true' Ethiopian and thus anyone with distinct socio-cultural features is categorized as less Ethiopian. Accordingly, the current Ethiopian federalism that restructure the administrative hierarchy of the country along ethno-linguistic line is considered as the greatest threat to national unity and some goes far to resemble it with the colonial policy of 'divide and rule' that definitely would lead Ethiopia for further fragmentation.

### ***Vertex 2- 'Many People, Many Histories but One Ruler'***

The political thinking in this vertex seem to strongly denounce the 'good old days' theory and claim that the old days were not really good for all. Elites in this block argue that *Ethiopianness* is not a primordial concept rather it is a contractual agreement that can be terminated if either of the parties breach terms of the contract. Thus, distinct identity groups within Ethiopia should respect and tolerate each other in order to make the contractual

marriage sustainable. According to this block, indeed, Axumite or Abyssinian kingdom is the founding polar for today's Ethiopia; however, modern Ethiopia has a history of forceful incorporation of independent or semi-independent territories by Menelik's force. Therefore, acknowledging past mistakes and corrective measures must have been taken in order to heal past wounds and cherish Ethiopian unity in diversity. According to this block, 'corrective measures' range from rewriting of the country's history to naming regional administration and licence plates after the name of these ethnic groups. Even though all ethnicities could not get hold of the opportunity to have their kin regional presidents, each state has established a responsible bureau to develop their language and cultural heritages. The political elites cornered in this angle further went as far as developing an umbrella language (WEGAGODA) in order to reconcile distinct dialects in the southern region of Ethiopia.

Despite their background in the Orthodox Church, most sympathizers of this block are able to inspire the TPLF's ideological thinking of differentiating the threat of the Church and that of the state so that they declare to give ears for the quest of various ethnic and religious identity groups who claim to be marginalized in previous regimes. Nevertheless, in order to enable these concepts to deeply-rooted as the culture of the larger Ethiopian people, TPLF led EPRDF should stay in power for unlimited decades or even centuries. Adherents of this political thinking have strong belief that 'these noble principles, many comrades sacrificed their lives for' should be shielded from any threat not only from those in vertex one but also from the marginalized ethnic groups to whom the sacrifices were paid for. Thus, the so-called minority ethnic and religious groups are also under high surveillance in order to control them for making 'unintentional' mistakes that could demolish the right they are enjoying now.

### ***Vertex -3 'No Assimilation, No façade Decentralization'***

In this block, some identity groups claim to have independent and/or semi-independent traditional administrations prior to the incorporation of the Ethiopian hinterland. Even though many accept that they were (at least in some point in history) tributaries of the *Ase*s (emperors) of Abyssinia, they regarded Menelik's forceful incorporation as relentless damage in their traditional self-rule, cultural heritages and economic well-beings. As a response, some identities claim for the social, cultural and political rights within the Ethiopian context while others goes far and declare secession from the *Habesha* Empire as the sole way out from the past historical traumas. Meanwhile, apart from some extreme political organizations, many in this corner of political thinking tend to appreciate the response given for the nationalities question under the current Ethiopian political landscape at least in principle. According to elites in this block, the rights to exercise self-rule, rights to develop languages and cultural assets, being stakeholder in the national politics are agreeable elements for cultivating the sentiment of *Ethiopianness*.

Few years after the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia, most of the sympathizers in this block denounced the TPLF's way of executing this policy by claiming that TPLF has hijacked and manipulated the nationalities question to prolong its hold on power and creating a new Tigriyan hegemonic groups who have similar feature with the old invaders of our forefathers land. According to their claim, 'the sole difference between the old and the new *Neftegnas* is the former forced us to assimilate with their cultural identity while the later exploiting our land with no obligation levied on us to learn Tigriyna.' This claim is echoing from the fertile lands of Oromo to the oil rich western Gambella, the gas-fields in eastern Ogaden and the mineral-rich Dallol deserts in the north. Hence, those cornered in this vertex of the triangle are also in favour of change in the political scenario of the country.

## ***Misconceptions***

It seems that there are some misperceptions among each block and surprisingly enough all stationed at their respective vertices of the triangle and prefer to shout at once with no or little effort for mutual understandings. Particularly, the misperceptions between the first and the third vertices are sophisticated further while those in the second vertex seem to understand the polarization in the political thinking of the country but appear to manipulate the gap for its own political agenda. Many accused the second block for using both the first and the third blocks as a scarecrow to frighten one against the other. The best example could be, the incident during the 2005 election in which Prime Minister Melse Zenawi was running up and down to negotiate with the OLF leadership in order to convince them to side with EPRDF rather than backing the *Kinjit* or at least to hold neutral stand instead of taking side with ‘the good old day dreamers.’ Similar messages were sent to the Afars, Somalis, Hararis, Gambellas and so on notifying them to guard the regime before the ‘old nightmares back again.’ Warning bell was also ringing from the second vertex loud enough to be heard far distance up to the first corner which says ‘unless you gave up and accept the return of the Axum throne to its owners, all the minority tribes who tastes the sweetness of the ethnic politics would make Ethiopia split up in to pieces.’

In spite of the second block comparative advantage to manipulate the misperceptions between the first and third blocks, both groups cannot escape from their responsibility for wasting two decades with assumptions that led them to prejudice and in turn driven them to accuse against each other while sticking to polarized corners. The electoral politics seems to be taken for granted as the mere tool that pushes some political elites from vertices one and three at least to cooperate for some short period. However, one who observes particularly the diaspora politics where each person believe to talk his/her mind could obviously witness that apart from the joint interest to challenge the ruling party, the misperceptions are yet existed with equivalent gap they have twenty years before. Some may believe the ultimate solution for Ethiopian political crisis is to overthrow the ruling party or changing of some articles in the constitution. For the others, the loss of power and coming of the oppositions into the Menelik palace is the most fearful nightmare that would take them back to the ‘horourious’ past. There are also other groups trapped in between of the two threats, frighten both the past and the status quo. Unless the three major triangular political thinking, waving in the country’s political scene are transformed to a straight line levelled platform, change of government by any means, ruling party substitution strategies, the separatist’s ambitious dreams, as well as the electoral politics would make no significant influence on political transformation in Ethiopia.

## ***Bridging the Gaps***

Those in vertex one should admit the pluralism of Ethiopian politics and history. Denial of the atrocities committed in the past would lead nowhere except blocking possibilities to understand each other. It is indisputable truth that either directly or indirectly, identity groups were culturally suppressed politically marginalized and economically deprived within the geographical area of today's Ethiopia. Denouncing the Jewish Yodit, the Agew Zagwe, the Muslim Ahmed Gragn, and ‘invasion of the pagan Oromo’ might be accepted from the Church point of view. However, it is really an idea difficult to sell for Oromos, Somalis, Sidamas, Afars, Agew and all who consider them as heroes. It seems a logical fallacy to assume that the Turkish help to Ahmed Gragn was a foreign threat to mother Ethiopia while the Portuguese support to Lebna Dengel was mission for salivating Ethiopia. Elites in this block should have a gut to depart their political thinking from mythology of the church. ‘Give

*Caesar what belongs to Caesar, give God what belongs to God.*' They should try to realize the analogy between the noble ideas of Ethiopians who struggle to develop their culture and Amharic language in the American melting pot and fellow Ethiopian nationalities who demand for the same right in their own motherland to the least. As we all are delighted to see Obama in the white house, we should make our mind ready to have Obangs or Meraras in the Menelik palace.

The third block on the other side should stop scratching past wounds and focus on contributing their share in making the future best for all with no distinction in race, religion, and the like. Better to look back to the past to enable them to grasp lessons rather than marching for avenges against the innocent great grand children of 'others'. It seems illogical to develop mentality of punishing the son for his father's sin. The political elites cornered in this vertex should acknowledge that state construction might have its own drawbacks in the history of each single state. There were historical ills among various identity groups during state buildings all over the globe. The question should be 'are all citizens getting equitable share in the country's politico-economic sphere?' The selective reading of histories should be halted. There should be a respect for what Gobena or Omar Samatar did for their country if one expects others to praise what Waqo Gutu or Abdillah Hassen did for their nations.

The current ethnic federalism shall also be regarded (at least conceptually) as a positive discrimination given to the heavily marginalized identities in some historical trajectories of the country in order to enable them to build their socio-cultural and politico-economic settings and reach to be capable enough to stand in a levelled platform with brothers who had relatively better opportunities. The ethnic federalism shall better be considered as a time defined occasion to enhance the status of minorities (politico-economically) rather than manipulating the ethnic politics to the extent of demolishing the already built nexus among people of the state. There should be general consensuses on the federal arrangement to include basic elements other than ethno-linguistic yardsticks. The political elites in this block particularly of the Oromos shall self-criticize their political thinking and better to make slight shifts of objective. The numerically majority Oromos are expected to hold the driving wheel of this block and struggle to guarantee the right of all marginalized people of Ethiopia instead of sticking with unrealizable nightmare to break away from the Habeshas. Using the cause of Oromos earlier by the Somalis of Mogadishu and now by the Kebessa of Eritrea should be stopped. Similar understanding should also be shared by the Ogadeaneas and Muslims as a whole. Celebrating Muslim holidays either in Meskel Square or Millennium hall should not be taken as last resort in securing their right as a group. They shall not praise rights as given by some group or party, rather come out of their cave and actively participate in any spectrum of the country's political life.

At last, if the interest of those cornered in the second vertex of the triangle is really to deep-grave ethno-cultural chauvinism, then they shall better deal with it in a manner that would not alienate 'others' and duplicate the other side of chauvinism. Adherents of this block who rule the country for the last two decades should have been successful to inculcate the ideals thousands of its comrades have died for as claimed. Living alien in the extreme corner by controlling every single movement in the country ranges from the economy to civil service, intelligence, military and what have you, would bring no good either for fellow Tigrians or to the fate of the future Ethiopia. There are no one, other than the political elites in this block, who could better understand that centuries old rule in power could not guarantee the sustainability of own political thinking unless accepted by the majority. They should be able to break the cycle of constructing and demolishing that seems typical Ethiopian syndrome in different successive regimes. Those in this block should go far to the extent of bridging the

misunderstanding between the other two groups cornered in their respective caves instead of manipulating and widening the gap. The ethnic politics shall be considered as a tool to equilibrate the socio-economic and political status of each identity groups and eventually facilitate a royal exit for itself to be replaced by a concrete morale values and individual freedom where all Ethiopia's children co-exist affectionately. All in all, it seems that Ethiopia's political elites have a huge backlog to clear the path for the coming generations. Otherwise we are leaving our homework to our children that in their time may transform from the current triangular shape of political thinking to more sophisticated scenarios.