

## **Whose nationalism?**

**By Gemencho**

It is a distortion to place history outside of the ideological and material conditions that shape social relations, constraints and conflicts. To do so, is to overlook the dynamics and complexity of domination which includes but not limited to class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion and reduce it to one universal form or another. It is to dismiss the asymmetrical relations of power in all aspects of social relations. The misreading of Ethiopian nationalism is one aspect of such distortions. This misreading continues to manifest in different forms subverting honest discussions about the true meaning of national consciousness.

One such manifestation showed itself with the Weyane/Shabia conflict which gave Meles and his cronies the tools they need to conduct their war. The war ended up consuming hundreds of thousands of young Ethiopians and Eritreans. In this conflict, the Weyanes were turned overnight into the defenders of Ethiopian nationalism against the Eritrean invaders. The Gebru Asrats were dubbed as national heroes. The same manifestation is rearing its ugly head, and this time turning against all Tigreans. It was Albert Camus who warned us about the danger nationalism poses to freedom when it falls into the hands of elites who do not have the interests of the people they claim to represent. Our own experience, the past and the present is also educational. The Colonels wiped out one generation of young Ethiopians in the name of nationalism. The Emperors before them did not fare any better. They used the same rhetoric to justify their rule. They instituted serfdom, blatant discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and religion.

Nationalism is a concept that is profoundly shaped by lived experiences and in turn shapes those experiences. For this reason, it is important to distinguish between the nationalism of the rulers and the nationalism of the ruled. The Ethiopia of the Emperors and the colonels are different from the Ethiopia of the Ethiopian peoples. Neither is there a convergence of understanding between what Tuma calls, the Sheratonians and the Ethiopian people on this issue. To believe there is, is to consider the latter as inanimate objects who can not make meaning of their own realities.

It is within this theoretical framework of Ethiopian nationalism that the 60s and 70s revolutionaries came into the picture. The revolutionaries and the organization they built, the EPRP, flushed out the antithetical relationship between the Ethiopia of the rulers and the Ethiopia of the ruled, and argued that no more should Ethiopian nationalism be captive by demagogues who use it for their own group interests. They made the call to do away with the exploitative, chauvinist, and patriarchal system that had strangled the people for far too long and denied their rights as citizens. .

Yekatit happened as a result of the organic link that the 60s and 70s revolutionaries made with what they clearly defined as their constituents. The revolutionaries took their case to the urban and rural poor, to women, to oppressed and discriminated ethnic groups to remind them that the country in which they live and toil belong to them, and that it was their inalienable right to own it. Yekatit was the practical application of the imagination of the revolutionaries. It was the mapping of a new direction taken up by every day Ethiopians towards what their country ought to be. Let

the people and the land be sovereign, Let there be an end to authoritarian and patriarchal rule, and let Ethiopia belong to all of its peoples with their dignity intact.

In Yekatit, the people did not just uproot the repressive feudal system. They also joined the revolutionaries to shatter the long held myth of national consciousness coming from the top to the bottom.

In my view, it is this nationalism that will be a potent force in doing away the nationalism of demagogues and save the country from the destruction that the Weyanes are hoping for and working towards.