

ANDM turns 37. A look at its achievements, challenges and future prospects

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Addis Abeba, November 28/2017 – The successful armed struggle of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the sweeping national reforms that followed the regime change in 1991 ushered in a new chapter in Ethiopian history.

To date, the historical significance of EPRDF has been elucidated in light of the overall stagnation that prevailed in Ethiopia under the Imperial and the military regimes. While that is a crucial political discourse to appeal to the wounded memory of many Ethiopians, it has nonetheless been too reductionist. EPRDF’s real historical meaning in the long and protracted struggle of the Ethiopian people awaits the future historian. Nonetheless, attempting a tentative appraisal of the party in the long struggle for autonomy, cultural worth and dignity has become irresistible by the turn of events. This short essay attempts to cast the history of the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) in light of the protracted struggle of the Amhara in the unfinished phenomenon of state formation. Besides, in the context of the ongoing political turmoil, the essay highlights some merits in defense of ANDM’s 37th foundation anniversary by situating the achievements, challenges and prospects of Ethiopia under EPRDF in the long historical discourse of the country.



Achievements

The Amhara might have been, perhaps, the most restless empire builders since at least the thirteenth century. However, the demeaning criteria of legitimacy for office, cultural oppression, poor governance, and exploitation, among others, had undermined the creation of a united and powerful state. The culture of political marriage proved a useful state craft in forging a platform for a joint state building and preservation of national independence but not to nurture cultural differences. Using inter-ethnic political marriage for “unity” was never appealing to common people and modern educated nationalists alike. While Amhara rulers could not be singled out for whatever miseries the Ethiopian nations, nationalities and peoples suffered (since the leaders in the most crucial period of national unification had either mixed ethnic background or were more of Oromo than Amhara), ethno-nationalists found it convenient to blame the Amhara people alone. While this is incorrect, it is understandable since most, if not all, feudal-like rulers outside the present Amhara region who were burdensome to the local people were Amhara. When Professor Asrat Woldeyes remarked that the Amhara had never ruled alone, he was stating the obvious. What was not acknowledged is that the overall discontent and marginalization of the Ethiopian nations, nationalists and peoples could not be silenced by the participation of a few of their members in an oppressive state.

Although the Ethiopian leadership in the well-known history of the country was drawn from many nationalities, a false notion of Amhara superiority was in the making which found overt expression in hate speech. This, coupled with other grievances, slowly but surely gave rise to anti-Amhara sentiment which Amhara notables and intellectuals clearly felt but were unable to respond creatively and courageously. Since the 1960s, among the major nations, the Amhara were the only group that lacked political organizations to assert its interest *vis-à-vis* the mushrooming ethno-political organizations that were openly critical of the real and perceived Amhara domination. Even what would become ANDM was first constituted with a pan-Ethiopian spirit and practice (first as EPRP and then as EPDM) and its founders were composed of various ethnic groups. As the EPRP suffered from lack of clear political objective, military incompetence and organizational infighting, its disillusioned members walked away from the struggle. Only a few endured the arduous task of sustaining the armed struggle which later on gave the triumphant TPLF a rare historic opportunity to transcend its narrowly defined political vision. However, under the circumstances following regime change in 1991, EPDM members had to shoulder the painful process of reducing their multinational stature to embrace ethnic organization which they wrongly or rightly disapproved previously. According to Bereket Simon, this process represents an upward progress in the history of the party. As it was the case with TPLF, the balancing of ethnic and

state organization, hence ethnic federalism, is said to be a pragmatic and inborn response to the historically shaped problems on the ground.

The immediate post *Derg* period posed threats of state collapse and, more notably, some Amhara suffered attacks on ethnic and historic grounds. The Amhara were totally caught unprepared to that scenario so that some of its elites retreated to a smug rhetoric- *there is no Amhara nation*. Others established a political party for the Amhara without creating a working relationship with parties articulating the interests of other ethnic groups. It was under this bitter circumstance that EPDM redefined itself as ANDM in 1994. This continuous self-readjustment and unyielding readiness to accept the reality stems from and contributed to the judicious leadership qualities of ANDM. Without the leadership of ANDM and its sister organizations, the anti-Amhara sentiment developed from exaggerated misappropriation of history could have graver consequences. Unable to appreciate the dangers averted, some blame ANDM/EPRDF for raw attacks on the Amhara perpetrated by various quarters. On the whole, however, the overall management of regime change in 1991 was one of the peaceful transitions in revolutionary history.

Many reasons justify the commemoration of ANDM's 37th year foundation anniversary. ANDM and its sister organizations decisively transformed the form and substance of the Ethiopian state. The dramatic and unprecedented respect to and promotion of diversity has ended the multifaceted oppression which the Ethiopian peoples, nations and nationalities endured for centuries. EPRDF has by and large addressed a very old problem of ideological disorientation that crystallized into a skewed constitutionally backed politics of exclusivity and cultural marginalization. Although most of such changes were fruits of the 1974 Revolution, it was EPRDF that boldly redefined Ethiopia like it had never been before. Hence, by building on the great achievements of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution and introducing multi-ethnic federalism, the regime change in 1991 was the real turning point in Ethiopian history. The towering achievements since then represent a redress to the lost centuries characterized by frequent civil wars, backwardness, chronic poverty and national weakness.

Besides, ANDM deserves praise for what it contributed to the development of the Amhara Region. According to the current Minister of Education, Dr. Tilaye Gete, before 1991, the coverage of modern education in Amhara region was below the national average – it stood third from the bottom, above Somali and Afar regions. In this regard, the Amhara were among the forgotten peoples in Ethiopia. Today, the region is enjoying massive expansion of education and remarkable improvements in vegetation coverage and increases in agricultural productivity. Expansion of irrigation and natural resource conservation helped a great deal in restoring ecosystems and aquatic birds have become common where they didn't exist before. Ducks might soon become our food or an export item. ANDM is

successfully fighting unemployment among the urban youth who are increasingly identifying their solidarity with the Movement. Although the democratization process suffered acute setbacks, it is going on with a gradual speed as warranted by pragmatic response to the array of evolutionary bottlenecks on the ground. Given the commendable management of the post-military phase of the struggle, ANDM has honored the causes for which its comrades died for.

With ANDM, the Amhara have assumed a new role of fostering Amhara nationalism and redefining their relationships with other nations, nationalities and peoples through a commitment to Democratic Nationalism. There is no way out for Ethiopia other than promoting Democratic Nationalism, which adheres to the idea that nations, nationalities and peoples are born equal and shall remain so. For what it contributes at country and regional levels, ANDM draws its success from its wise and experienced leadership which is noted for its better accommodation of diversity within its region and a relative detachment from corruption. ANDM is a *bona fide* partner in Ethiopia's political and economic progresses.

Challenges

In spite of the irreversible promotion of cultural diversity and inspiring economic development witnessed under ANDM/EPRDF leadership, there are unsettling popular discontents popping up in Amhara and other regions. While Ethiopian opposition parties, political activists and foreign powers are implicated in the sporadic insurrections, violence and degeneration of social fabrics, the main problem that propelled the ambitions of forces opposed to the party in power stems from what might be called the "official madness" of people running the state and party machineries. Few cases can be mentioned to show the prevalence of official madness.

There is a disheartening political culture in the making that promotes undue ethnic sentiment at the expense of collective sentimental attachment with the state. Member parties of EPRDF are overlooking equal responsibility for all people under their constituency which seems the reason why they open their branch offices in other regions to separately engage people thought to belong to their ethnic groups. That is exactly the way EPRDF member parties engage Ethiopians abroad. Indeed, there is a growing tendency to mistake regional administrative boundaries for international boundaries. Even in some universities, welcome parties are hosted separately for students coming from different regions, organized by the party governing their home regional state. It is as if EPRDF regards such branch offices the way consulates are conceived by sovereign states in international relations. Not surprisingly, EPRDF officials regard the European Union as a role model for the economic and political integration of regional states; a thriving union of formerly

independent countries in Europe mistaken as a benchmark for a problematic federation of formerly united peoples. If TPLF separately engages ethnic Tigray people in Gondar and ANDM does the same in Dire Dawa or Bale for the Amhara, there is a structural aspect that breeds a sense of mistrust among people living together. That structure is a team of rivals.

The foundation anniversaries of EPRDF member organizations showcase unrestrained and funny rhetorical competition for the role played in toppling the *Derg* regime; the connotation being perplexing. Even the Prime Minister and leaders of affiliate parties of EPRDF explicitly mention their unique gratitude and bond with one of the EPRDF member parties and the people it claims to represent. Such affiliate parties and the people they represent do not seem aware of the plain truth of their relative disenfranchisement from federal affairs. Instead of cementing the sense of comradeship among EPRDF members, this demeaning discourse feeds the opposite end. Recently, a middle level leadership trainee in Meles Zenawi Leadership Academy, dismissive of inter-party rhetorical competition, said something like this during the foundation anniversary of his party: “My people take pride for not shooting against the *Derg* troops, not the other way round; do not distort our history”. In real terms, EPRDF is more important than the sum of its members. It is curious, however, that after a quarter of a century core members and affiliates of EPRDF do not feel the need to celebrate the foundational anniversary of EPRDF which is more sensible in many ways. Celebrating the foundational anniversary of EPRDF and the inclusion of affiliate parties as a *bona fide* member of EPRDF should be a priority agenda.

There are many apolitical cases that show the immaturity or recklessness of elites. Websites apparently supporting one of the sister organizations of EPRDF publish articles bearing hate speech against the peoples or party officials in other regions. Officials attend book launch events even when the authors are known for their undemocratic nationalism. University instructors and students deserting their campuses for security concerns enjoy warm reception by the management of universities in their home regions. Leaders of regional states extend instant financial and other assistance to their displaced ethnic groups from other regions, while indifferent to the displacement of other ethnic groups. Neither victims nor administrators of the origin and destination of displaced people feel appropriate to seek justice for the violated right through the state judiciary. High ranking office holders use their personal Facebook pages to post irresponsible views. EPRDF’s official mouthpiece, *Addis Raey*, doesn’t refrain from revealing inner party disagreements on outstanding political issues. A situation analysis by the same magazine attributes responsibility for the ongoing instability to the farmers who, the argument goes, turned politically inactive after all of their demands have been fulfilled- thereby inducing the leadership to sleep. This is a *naïve*

attempt to divert boiling problems in urban areas to the supposed satisfaction of people in the rural areas.

On the one hand, the constitution upholds the unity of nations, nationalities and peoples based on empathy (*bemefekaked lay yetemeserete andinet*). On the other hand, there is a nuanced use of cliché catchwords by politicians such as “chauvinist”, “parochial”, “parasite”, “terrorist” & “narrow”, to mention just a few, to attack opponents in a manner that hints categorical labeling of groups and nationalities. This discourse reached its lowest ebb in the aftermath of the 2005 election when the then prime minister was televised signing a sort of military or political defense pact with representatives of Afar, Adari, Argoba, Silte and Somali peoples against “chauvinists”. The courageous initiative of the Amhara region to include *Afaan Oromoo* as a school subject sometime after the Transitional Government was aborted for unknown reasons, probably sabotaged because of inner-party power politics. To routinely recall the “sharp national contradiction’ among the Ethiopian nations and nationalities under former regimes is mistaken as a mark of a seasoned politician. The rhetoric of empathy-based unity is often superseded by systematic and blunt incitement of inter-ethnic conflict. In the same way, the official position of respecting the history of all ethnic groups doesn’t necessarily correspond with the actual political discourse. One might allege that under the veneer of Revolutionary Democracy as a lofty state policy, the actual practice resonates more with primeval tribalism. Unfortunately, this is adopted as a standard political strategy by opposition activists and radicalized part of the populace. Consequently, support or opposition to a party is a matter of group identity rather than shared ideological or policy interest.

Local popular discontent caused by unemployment, corruption and toxic ethnic politics is exacerbated by irresponsible opposition strategy by the Ethiopian diaspora, especially in the West. Ethiopia’s diplomats or civic associations abroad are silent about the acute hate speech uploaded on the internet inciting ethnic and religious strife in Ethiopia. Little or no effort is made to counter the ever aggressive propaganda of unequal ethnic empowerment in various arenas. Such problems, coupled with the subversive activities of hostile governments and unregulated social media have rendered effective governance difficult. Displacement, so far a problem of the Amhara, is becoming a real and present threat for all. Free movement and peaceful co-existence of people has reached its worst point thereby questioning the viability of the well performing economy. Ethiopia can hardly shoulder this internal contradiction while managing the spillover effects of crises in East Africa and the Middle East.

In sum, the current popular discontent can be seen as the logical consequence of two paradoxical qualities of the leadership: an agent economic development and political

decadence. So long as this official madness remains unchecked, its damaging effect on social fabrics and the state itself is a forgone conclusion. Hence, the real cause of the rising conflict and instability has to do with the imbalance between policy and practice, not external adversaries.

Prospects

The immediate task ahead is pacifying the country. In a conflict situation, a leadership is left with three response options: fight, flight and freeze. In the current context of EPRDF, **fighting** refers to boldly defending the *status quo* with rectification of miscellaneous non-structural problems. It is an option in the best case scenario where the ruling party is fully in charge of affairs. In the worst case scenario, fight might require upgrading the federation to a confederation. This is an option where the government is overwhelmed by centrifugal forces who cannot be satisfied under the premises of the existing federation. In the unlikely event of that scenario, EPRDF must govern involving opposition parties in a coalition or transitional government, where the armed forces assume unique responsibility to prevent fatal incidents without meddling in politics or attacking civilians.

Flight refers to admission of the failure of the multi-ethnic federalism and introducing numerous small geo-cultural administrative divisions. This option, though attractive for some reasons, is unrealistic since it will be boldly resisted by the people in some regions. **Freezing** is blindly sticking to the *status quo*. This cannot be an option without risking chaos.

EPRDF can count on cultural and economic achievements as key strongholds to stay in power. The problems caused by corruption, poor governance and discords within members of the party do not require establishing a transitional government as some think. Instead, it is high time to strictly implement the values stipulated for the federation. Since the ruling party is still powerful enough to control the state of affairs, the right way of confronting the ongoing public discontent is ending the rampant official madness. People in power should think and act beyond and above their ethnic bases. The people should be allowed to decide on major issues of national consensus such as the federal flag and working languages in heterogeneous areas with significant minority population. This could alleviate problems of 'identity politics' along regional administrative boundaries. EPRDF members and affiliate organizations should stop acting as a team of rivals. Those responsible for the displacement of people should face trial. A campaign should be launched to bring mega corrupts to justice. All levels of administration should engage the public with intensive discussion, as it was in the early years after the downfall of the *Derg*. The ongoing dialogue with opposition parties should be scaled-up with focus on concert outcomes. Diplomats abroad should consider legal means to prevent hate speech and incitement. In any case, should there be

the right political will and commitment, the current political crisis can be brought to a halt with a lasting lesson.

To conclude, ANDM's 37th foundation anniversary merits a cautiously jubilant celebration. Despite success stories, things have assumed a course of uncertain direction with unusual momentum. Fight or flight is necessary. Freezing serves nothing, even to buy time. A party that traveled miles to answer key national questions should not be afraid of its own courage. Conflict is natural and beneficial if managed properly. The party should celebrate its foundation anniversary with a determination to sustain its achievements while trying to fix the unintended consequences inherent or tangential to the infant ethno-democracy. As EPRDF takes pride in its achievements, it should concede responsibility for the ongoing political turmoil and start resolute, drastic and observable corrective measures to restore law and order and prevent total collapse. At this juncture of political confusion, the Amhara should rally behind ANDM and relive the historic national role of their forefathers- agents of unity.

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Work Experience

Ever since I was employed at Mekelle University in September 2003, in addition to my main duty of teaching and research activities, I was entrusted to deal with the tasks of the following posts in different times:

Position: Lecturer of History at the College of Social Sciences and Languages.

Activities: Teaching Ethiopian Culture, African History and World History courses and writing and editing history course modules.

Position: Scheduling and programming Officer of Education Faculty

Activities: Setting and monitoring exam schedules, supervising the teaching and learning process, assessing and reporting on the inventory of college resources.

Position: Deputy Director of Distance and Continuing Education, Mekelle University

Activities: Administering the admission, course offering, promotion and related issues of summer in-service students