

The Dilemma of Ethnocentricity and Democracy in Ethiopia: In the Spirit of Reconciliation

By Tegga Lendado

The dynamics of democracy and ethnocentricity are a puzzling paradox to my layman's mind. I am fascinated by those thinkers who can easily swap sides and at times, to juggle with both political concepts. In this short note, I am simply sharing my frustration, probably seeking company to my misery. In fact I am trying to show the danger of African or Ethiopian ethnocentric "democratic" concurrency. Here, I am attempting to lay a foundation for healthy and tolerant discussions in view of peace, justice and reconciliation among political and religious factions that may devour our communities. I do not wish to sound a politician because I am not one. However, I would not be shy to share my moral stance based on biblical principles while at the same time appreciating other ideals.

"The other difference concerns my puzzlement at the striking allegation that prompted me to write a response in the first place: the claim that "the bloody chaos and disruptions that occurred after the May 2005 national and regional elections in Ethiopia were undoubtedly . . . the outcome of Western interference and attempt bent on ousting the current nationalist and populist developmental regime and replacing it with a client government in Ethiopia that would serve the interests of the West and its multi-national/trans-national corporations, and not Ethiopia and the Ethiopians....I find it difficult to imagine that many EPRDF members accept this claim". (Harold Marcus commenting on Tesfaye Habisso).

What does 'current nationalist and populist developmental regime' mean? Was not Mengistu's dergue nationalist enough? Was not Adolf Hitler nationalist to the core? Could nationalism mean ruthlessness, racism or trivial tribalism in these contexts? Is not current Ethiopian nationalist and populist developmental regime based on ethnocentricity?

What does populist mean? If populist means a government 'of the people, for the people and by the people, as in the ideals of so-called 'democracy', then it is antithesis to tribalism, ethnocentricity or "nationalism" or neo-apartheid. Just as Professor Harold Marcus asserted herein above I also find it difficult to swallow. Regarding tribalism David Lamb says,

"Tribalism is one of the most difficult African concepts to grasp..... Publically, modern African politicians deplore it. Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi calls it the cancer that threatens to eat out the very fabric of our nation." Yet almost every African politician practices it-- most African presidents are more tribal chief than national statesman... It (tribalism) remains perhaps the most potent force in day-to-day African life".

In most post-independence African countries political leaders have been pulled apart between the onslaughts of divisive colonial-tribal legacy and the new nationalistic order. In the process they have become demi-gods and bonafide dictators. In the case of Ethiopia, primitive feudalism with its malice had held the country hostage to its painful and glorious past. Modernization was taboo for the feudo-ecclesiastical empire which kept Ethiopia as a deserted island in the sea of the dynamic contemporary world until the 1974 revolution.

Prof. Marcus says, "In a disastrous turn of events, a small group of junior military officers hijacked the revolution and emerged as the most formidable force that defined the course of the popular uprising. What started as a nonviolent movement for change ended in bloodbath when the army officers turned their guns against the idealist young men and women who had a better vision for their people. During the dark era of the Red Terror,

hundreds of thousands of fellow Ethiopians were tortured and slaughtered in cold blood. The 1991 ethnic-based revolution was dictated by two northern rebel groups that speak the same language, i.e. the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TEPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). With the full complicity of the TPLF, EPLF seceded Eritrea and declared independence. TPLF monopolistically controlled state power in Ethiopia and chose the colonial way of "power sharing" with its subservient puppet ethnic liberation groups it organized and created in its own image."

Interestingly, the above statements suggest that EPLF sponsored all other ethnic liberation fronts including TPLF. Now that Eritrea is gone with its EPLF elites of ethnic political philosophy, why would Ethiopia TPLF leaders adhere to EPLF's schemes? Why should Ethiopia dwell on ethnic or tribal liberation *front* mentality even after liberating the ethnic groups which aspired for equality and justice? In other words, why should all the other liberation fronts exist in a federal democratic arrangement? The existence of such movements seems to be absurd, redundant and problematic especially after its objectives have long been achieved. This leads me to say that all those liberation fronts including the TPLF should now join hands and hearts to form a reunited democratic Ethiopia. I suppose that would then close the chapter of ethnocentricity. Such a process would need engaging dialogues for peace, justice and reconciliation. Ethiopian well-wishers and humanitarian entities need to save it from the onslaughts ethnocentric extremism by pressuring the government and opposition parties to a negotiating table as a peace partner. Religious and other community leaders could broker such engagements.

My biblical Christian ethical commitment does not allow me to think and act ethnocentric or tribal, majority or minority but universal and transcendental. I believe a human being is larger than him/herself or his/her tribe or even his/her own life because he/she is created in the likeness of God for God's eternal purpose. I must therefore love and respect my neighbor. Any hatred or contempt toward my neighbor irrespective of his/her national, racial or tribal tag would be construed as an assault on God's very image; for the Bible says, "He who hates his brother is a murderer". That is why I have to **start with humanity first** to describe my ethos. All other elements of my complex *ethos* come after my humanity. Probably, closer to my humanity is my ethiopianness.

Ultra-ethno-centricity essentially defies human dignity and morality. It promotes nepotism, corruption, attitude of superiority, inferiority, racism, tribalism and clanism (ex. KKK, apartheid, slavery, segregation, ethnic cleansing, etc.). I believe in the Eternal, All-wise, Very Different and Sovereign God. This is the only way I can make any sense of this life even in tragedies and suffering and the rule of evil. The principle of democratic governance by representation is a biblical principle: "...thou shalt provide men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness (unjust gain); and place such over them, to be rulers..." Exodus 18:21. Representative democracy may be the closest system that may insure peace and prosperity.

May the Almighty God transform our hearts and minds to serve all peoples in truth!