



State Decay: The case of Ethiopia and the Somali demand for self-determination

By Faisal Roble
January 31, 2024

Ethiopia is described as a [fragile](#) state, if not a [failed state](#), yet. This may or may not be the result of state decay. What is uncontested is Ethiopia is one of the leading countries worldwide for internally displaced persons (IDPs) since World War II, [hosting more than 4.3 million](#) IDPs who lost their homes and livelihood; between 600, 000 and over one million people estimated to have been killed in the two-year bloody that started in the region Tigray region 2020 and spread to Amhara and Afar regions before the guns were finally silenced in November 2022.

The Tigray war is unlike anything the world has witnessed in recent history. It was marked by war crimes and crimes against humanity such as mass rape and other forms of sexual assault including sexual slavery, starvation used as a weapon of war, extrajudicial killings of civilians and most of all a *de facto* siege in the Tigray region, home to at least six million Ethiopians. It is this brutal nature of the war that makes the argument valid that the Ethiopian state has indeed decayed.

This piece will describe the causes for state decay and major national groups in the country that are locked in a virtual political disentanglement. In the past, most of the conflicts originated from regions casually known as ‘the periphery.’ However, the war theaters in the current devastating conflicts are centered around Ethiopia’s core regions, especially Oromia and Amhara regions, undermining the traditional concepts of state authority and legitimacy.



Faisal A. Roble

Further towards the second half of this piece, how Ethiopia’s decades-old state-building process thus far pursued the antidemocratic approach, which failed to address the demands of the Somalis, the third largest national group in Ethiopia, but one of the regions described as being Ethiopia’s quintessential ‘periphery’.

State decay at the center

With its multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious population hovering around an estimated 120 million and inching towards 160 million by 2040 according to some projections, Ethiopia is a country with a unique history and geography.

With its story of “The Battle of Adwa”, the story of triumph by a black nation over the invading colonial power of a western country, Italy, Ethiopia as a country claim to be the source of pride for many African nations. And yet it is also a country that historically enslaved and/or [internally colonized its own peoples](#). It is this duality about Ethiopia that perpetually makes the state formation argument a contested space.

There is a *pax Ethiopiana* narrative favored by the centrists versus a narrative by proponents of the right for self-determination of nations. The 1974 Derg revolution and [the 1975 proclamation of land ownership reform](#), a revolutionary law that handed about 10 billion hectares of arable land back to smallholders who are mostly in the southern and eastern parts of the country dealt the first blow at the [center’s grip over power](#). (The Derg revolution is 50 years old as of this April). Second, the passage of the 1995 Ethiopian Federal Constitution, which legally rearranged power by designating about nine autonomous regional power geographies, sealed a major portion of rights demanded by different national groups.

There are three more interrelated contemporary factors that are challenging state-building in Ethiopia. One is the question of nations and nationalities, which is the result of the hegemonic political culture Abyssinians imposed on a decidedly defiant periphery region. Somalis continued to be the most defiant national group against this imposition by the center.

The second is the 2020-2022 Tigray war, which dealt further divide between the Amhara and Tigrayan communities, two national groups representing differing views of state-building in Ethiopia but had peaceful co-existence as neighboring regions even in post 1991 state formation.

Although Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed presided over the war that pitted these two regions, Amhara Special forces, local militia and the non-state armed group ‘Fano’ supported by Amhara elite both inside and outside the country, have been the culprit in what is now recognized as the single deadliest war since World War II. The long lasting outcome of this is its potential contribution to an ever-more assertive Tigray as a ‘periphery.’

The third factor is the ever-decaying center itself that refused to democratize state structure, thus displaying its inability to peacefully hold the center and the periphery together except by brute force. Therefore, the lethal combination of a freer and assertive periphery and a progressively decaying center have weakened the hitherto state-sponsored *pax Ethiopiana* position. With credible and legitimate concerns, even the Amhara peasants are now feeling betrayed by the center as we are witnessing the Fano defiance against Addis Abeba.



State Decay: The case of Ethiopia and the Somali demand for self-determination

By Faisal A. Roble
WardheerNews

In addition to the demise of the aristocracy and a tightly knit bureaucracy, the other contributing factors to the ever-decaying state power at the center are the recent divisions within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church (EOTC), and a dwindling foreign military support and diplomatic alliance with the center from Ethiopia's traditional allies.

For example, the acceptance of the concept of nationality-based federalism by Ethiopia's traditional allies in the West, the breakdown of Amhara-Tigray alliance, the proliferation of the Pentecostal Churches that are siphoning congregation members from the Orthodox Church, rapid urbanization in highland Ethiopia, a dwindling surplus transferred from the south, and institutionalization of regional governments in the last thirty years have collectively contributed to the making of deep and possibly [irreparable cracks in the center](#).

Although Christopher Clapham still hangs on to the traditional way of explaining dangers to Ethiopia as originating from the "pastoralist zone" such as "Somalis, Borana, Oromo, Sidama, and Afar" he fails to address that the contemporary armed triangle in the African continent is the axis of Amhara-Tigray Eritrea.

Driven by both old and new identity politics, thousands of heavily armed militias are facing each other on the shared borders between three groups. As a matter of fact, northern Ethiopia is today divided militarily, politically and socially, all of which typify the attributes of the decaying Abyssinian center.

None other than the 22 June 2019 high level assassination of Amhara state president and other high level officials, which was engineered by a rising Amhara nationalist, Brigadier General Asamenew Tsige, indicates the crescendo of the decaying center. The [International Crisis Group wrote](#) "the 22 June assassinations and alleged attempted regional coup came as a stark illustration of the gravity of the crisis affecting both the ruling party and the country."

Victims of the attempted coup included Amhara's state president, Ambachew Mekonnen, who was a close ally of Prime Minister Abiy, as well as Migbaru Kebede, the Attorney General of Amhara regional state, and Azeze Wasse, the regional administration's public organization advisor. In Addis Abeba, General Seare Mekonnen, Chief of staff of the national defense forces who was a Tigrayan, and Major General Gezai Abera, a retired general visiting Seare were killed the same night.

Prior to these assassinations, Asamenew was riling up his followers in their thousands with the rhetoric to turn the clock back to the political culture of imperial Ethiopia. Three years later following said foiled coup, Amhara region is the most unstable region where a bloody war between Amhara militia and the Ethiopian National Defense Forces is causing havoc on civilian lives and their livelihood.

Over the spoils of the decaying state are three forces competing to shape Ethiopian political narrative. The first group calls for a central government that seeks to remove Article 39 that [guaranteed the right of nations and nationalities for self-determination](#) from the 1995 FDRE Constitution. For example, Asamenew and the followers of his ideological conviction, the political party formerly known as Ginbot 7, which today became Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EzEMA), the opposition National Movement of Amhara (NaMA) and a host of other collectives under the various Fano forces, as well as a group of other registered political parties operating in Ethiopia are at the forefront of advocating for this cause. This group on Ethiopia's political right believes that Ethiopia's multi-national federalism is the root cause of the crises the country is facing today and will eventually lead to disintegration.

The other group, from the newly formed opposition political party Sidama Federalist Party (SFP), to the oldest ones Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), as well as armed groups such as the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), Gambella Liberation Front (GLF), are struggling

not only to preserve the *status quo* as per the 1995 constitution, where autonomy for regions was hitherto nominal while disproportionate power remains in the center, but also for more devolution of power from the center.

Such has been the scenario during the 27 years of EPRDF rule that mainly catered to the four dominant ruling parties of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). As the ruling party along with five other satellite parties from Ethiopia's 'periphery' this group claimed to defend the 1995 FDRE Constitution, but it was more rhetorical than practical.

Since Prime Minister Abiy came to office in April 2018, the ruling Oromo political elite have moved towards the Ethiopian right's worldview. Albeit short lived, the popular [political alliance called Oromara](#), standing for Oromo-Amhara preceded, and in many ways, facilitated Abiy's ascent to power. But the establishment of Prosperity Party (PP) by Abiy Ahmed was the first death knell for any possibilities of a meaningful political purpose of this alliance, which had already kicked off by alienating the TPLF, or was formed for the sole purpose of it. With no clear long-term strategy except being anti- TPLF, this alliance is now undergoing a violent divorce in the immediate wake of the Pretoria peace agreement, and the re-emergence of federalist rebel groups including the OLA. The armed violence between the federal forces and the Fano militia that has gripped Amhara region for the last 5-6 months is the physical manifestation of this divorce.

The third group largely comes from hitherto colonized peoples the 'periphery' such as the Somalis, Afaris, and the Sidama, among dozens of other nations, whose core beliefs in the right to self determination is sacrosanct, and seem to settle for either complete independence or a functioning multinational democratic federal system. If there is any position these disparate groups share, it is the belief that Ethiopia could disintegrate if an inclusive and equitable political solution is not found. Different experts and scholars examined or opined the delicate nature of the contemporary Ethiopian state. Herman Cohen, former Undersecretary for African Affairs commented in a tweet dated 24 June 2019 following the multiple assassinations [stated that it was](#) "an attempt by ethnic nationalists to restore Amhara hegemony over all of Ethiopia that existed for several centuries prior to 1991. That dream is now permanently dead."

Only days before the coup, Ambassador Johnnie Carson of the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) [warned of the potential fragmentation of Ethiopia](#). In a high-level conference dubbed "A Changing Ethiopia: Lessons from the US Diplomatic Engagement," the last serving four US ambassadors assigned to that country (1991 through 2006) shared their constructive insights about the decaying polity of that country. The diplomats all agreed that unless a concrete democratization process, including free and fair elections, replaced the stubborn political culture, there were potential factors that could lead to the country's fragmentation.

Ambassador Carson, who in the past served as the United States Undersecretary for Africa Affairs during President Obama's administration, and is a long-time career diplomat, delivered impactful introductory remarks assessing the changes that were taking place in Ethiopia. Without mincing his words, he loudly expressed his fear of a potential fragmentation of Ethiopia and likened such a possibility to the former Yugoslavian experience. For Carson to openly raise stakes so high in public and pronounce the possible fragmentation of Ethiopia was but a serious warning. The fact that the litany of promising reforms that Ambassador Carson and the remaining participants credited Abiy for initiated have all since gone south adds up to the warning.

The latest rise and subsequent revolt of the Amhara Fano in the summer of 2023 against the very administration that the region relies on in its power-relation with the center raises the spectrum for a possible fragmentation of Africa's only home-grown empire. And it remains so.

Proxy power in the Somali region

Imperial Ethiopia always ruled Somalis through a proxy regional elite. Both in the era of Emperor Haile Sellassie and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, Somalis have been ruled by [the colonial theory](#) of Colonial Britain's Baron Lugard – working through a proxy elite group, including traditional elders – while governance and real power rested in the hands of a vast military and security apparatus recruited from and [loyal to the center](#).

However, beginning with the creation of the nominal autonomous regional states in 1991, which is currently the units of administration both in the center and in the 'periphery' regions, leaders from regional ethnic groups in the 'peripheries' were empowered, thus the [creation of what the French colonial power](#) called *evolve* (*evolue*).

With *evolve*, the Abyssinian hegemonic system created a class of indigenous miscegenated or assimilated individuals in the Somali region whose loyalty and theoretical constructs are in line with the ruling elite in the center. Unlike the case with the French-style which was mostly educated, (Singhore was an *evolve* but highly educated in French culture and politics).

On the other hand, Somali regional *evolues* was a less educated cadre that has proven to be good only to carry the orders of the center with no challenge. It is precisely because of their subservient positions that most of Somali regional state cadres failed to meaningfully empower their citizens per the constitution which guarantees all regions the autonomy to run their affairs.

Addressing the undying demand for self-determination

Somalis are one of the least empowered and least integrated into the Ethiopian body politic. Majority Somalis, comprising Ethiopia's second and third largest territory and population, respectively, do not speak Amharic with almost no inter-marriage with Highland Ethiopians. John Markakis, author of [Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers](#), believes that it will take at least a century for some of these periphery regions to fully catch up with the center. Somalis are one of the most frontier and difficult-to-capture regions with no real catch up chances or integration in the offing.

There must be a paradigm shift in assessing the management of state-building and look for new models to address vexing issues that haunted the empire for far too long. Preserving the original imperial geography assembled at the turn of the 19th century should be tabled for discussion as part of searching for a sustainable solution to Ethiopia. "Ethiopia's leaders face a genuine dilemma, a choice between two risky alternatives. One is to make a clean break with the past, renounce center hegemony and accept equitable power-sharing with the periphery," writes Markakis, or else let these peripheral nationalities of the 'periphery' such as the Somalis gain self rule and independence from the center.

Prior to these the arrangement of the current ethnolinguistic regional states, the country was administratively subdivided into 14 regions. The old map served well for resource extraction by the center and accordingly perpetuated severe underdevelopment in the periphery regions; it also promoted gerrymandering of national groups thus minimizing their political role in this ancient empire. For example, Somalis were spread out in three administrative geographies, namely Hararghe, Bale, and formerly Sidamo, but they played no notable role in any of these administrative regions.

Similarly, the Derg also paid lip-service to the demands of Somali national rights and gave some limited recognition. Accordingly, with the promulgation of the 1987 constitution the Mengistu regime reorganized the country's administrative units with twenty-five administrative regions and five autonomous regions of Tigray, Eritrea, Asab, Issa and Gurgura, and Ogaden were created and given a limited, only on-paper recognition in the form of regional autonomy dubbed "Ras Gez" (self-governing).

The Derg regime gave Eritrea, Ogaden, Issa and Gurgura, and Afar Ras Gez (regional autonomy for these three groups). But despite creating said units of administration, the Derg gerrymandered the Somali region to minimize their political influence; its goal was not to create autonomous regions but to further divide and rule periphery groups, as well as contain the patriotic insurgency rather than relinquishing real rights to these groups.

On the other hand, Ethiopia's federal system, adopted in 1995, sought to grant limited autonomy and mandated the creation of nine regional states based on national identities, and settlement pattern and two autonomous city-states -Addis Abeba and Dire Dawa (Dridhabe) – with the goal to quell ethnic political strife. With the dissolution of the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's (SNNP) Regional state in four regions, the number of regional states grew to 13 over the last four years after Abiy's ascent to power.

However, despite the country's lofty constitution and the dissolution of SNNP, the grip of power by the center and the hegemony over the periphery remain unabated. The lasting effect the new map and the constitution had, which guarantees the rights of nationalities a full statehood, is to programmatically reduce the grip on state power by any group. However, between 1991 and 2018, that total grip on power resided in the hands of the center. In fact Prime Minister Abiy [has taken an aggressive role](#) of the center coercing the periphery.

In search of dreams

Incremental political reforms notwithstanding, the Somalis are still in search of their dream for Self-Determination. Article 39 of the existing constitution comes as a result of a long struggle by Somalis, whose resistance to occupation never ceased since Ras Mekonen's conquest.

Rooted in noble principles borrowed from both Woodrow Wilson's [14 points on self-determination](#) and Lenin's treatise of "[Critical Remarks on National Question](#)," Somalis would like the principle of self-determination as promulgated in the United Nations Charter after World War II, which unequivocally upholds the right of nationalities. Under this international instrument, Somalis should decide their fate of social, economic and political well-being. Article I of the Charter of the United Nations embodies the concept of "The principle of self-determination" on "Civil, Political Rights, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights" of [oppressed peoples](#).

Herman Cohen, former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (1989-19993), believes that Western nations erred in placing the Somali Ogaden Region under Ethiopian rule; he even goes as far to argue that the Somali Ogaden question deserves self-determination more than South Sudan or even Eritrea.

Many empires and countries implemented the principles of self-determination. For instance, before the Russian revolution of 1917, most of Poland and Finland were under the Russian empire. Today, they are free and independent nations. Likewise, under Western pressure, Sudan was forced to split into two countries. Even Ethiopia in the past has done so in that it permitted Eritrea to go free through a fair and

State Decay: The case of Ethiopia and the Somali demand for self-determination

By Faisal A. Roble

WardheerNews

internationally supervised referendum in 1994. The Somalis have less affinity and no meaningful integration with Abyssinia than Eritrea. But whether Addis Abeba will come up with a formula to satisfy the Somali remains to be seen.

According to the Ethiopian constitution, Somalis, as any other group, can pursue the right to self-determination up to secession as permitted by the constitution's article 39. The following procedures are set to effectuate full independence of a concerned nation or group: "(a) When a demand for secession has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Legislative Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned;(b) When the Federal Government has organized a referendum, which must take place within three years from the time it received the concerned council's decision for secession; (c) When the demand for secession is supported by a majority vote in the referendum; and (d) When the Federal Government will have transferred its powers to the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People who have voted to secede."

If the Somali region is granted self-determination, this outcome may bode well for Ethiopia in the long run in that the newly "created Somali State" may serve as a linkage for the integration of Ethiopia-Djibouti-Somalia.

In the belly of these states sits the Somali Ogaden region. In the final analysis, the decaying center and the surging ethnic strife forces us to think out of the box, even if that means remapping Ethiopia in the interest of stability and peaceful coexistence of the peoples of the Horn of Africa Region.

As technology advances, urbanization takes roots, and democratic values make inroads into hitherto oppressed communities, holding people in bondage without their collective consent is unsustainable. Implementing a full-fledged multi-national federalism rooted in democratic values is, however, a possible and attainable option to secession, if the leadership in Addis Abeba is prepared.

Johnnie Carson's impacting remarks on June 5, 2019 at the United States Institute for Peace calling for democratization before fragmentation should be read as a positive early warning system; If Addis Abeba fails to listen to the demands of its citizens, a "Yugoslavian" tsunami could hit it in its sleep, unprepared.

Faisal A. Roble

Email: faisalroble19@gmail.com

Faisal Roble, the former editor of WardheerNews portal is Principal City Planner and CEO for Racial Justice & Equity for the Planning Department, Los Angeles City.