

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN "DEMOCRATIC" ETHIOPIA: GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED ETHNIC HATRED

by

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In December 1997, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi proclaimed to a Congress of the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) that "human rights were now respected in Ethiopia and that peace was firmly established throughout the nation."¹ The protection of human rights would be a welcomed attainment for Ethiopia, a nation ruled by oppressive regimes throughout the twentieth century. Human rights, that is, governmental respect for freedom of expression and association, for due process of law, for equality before the law, and for the rights of citizens not to be subjected to cruel and degrading punishment,² are supposed to be guaranteed by the new constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and were promised by statements of the leaders of the government's ruling party, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).³ But in practice these guarantees and promises of protection of civil rights and civil liberties have not been fulfilled.

Critics of the FDRE frequently and ably have enumerated the evils by which Ethiopia has been beset since the EPRDF came to power in 1991,⁴ and the list of human rights abuses continues to grow by the day. In my opinion, there are two main causes for Ethiopia's dismal record in the protection of human rights. One can be traced to the political theory of the ruling party, and the other, mistrust and hatred among ethnic groups, grows out of the EPRDF's theory of governance.

The political theory of the EPRDF is spelled out in a secret sixty-eight page Amharic document approved by the party in June 1993. The document, translated into English and published in the Ethiopian Register in 1996, lays out the party's long-term goals and strategies for attaining them.⁵ For anyone interested in contemporary Ethiopia, this document should be required reading. Couched in rhetoric reminiscent of the party's Marxist-Leninist roots, the strategy paper provides details about how to keep the EPRDF in power. The document specifically addresses "Materializing the peoples' political and human rights." The self-proclaimed program of the party, "Revolutionary Democracy," is based on a polarized society composed of "the people" and "the ruling classes." By "the people," the document alludes to "the great majority of the population," also called "the great oppressed majority," while "the ruling classes," or "oppressors" refers to those who were in power during the regimes of the Emperor Haile Selassie or the Derg--or more correctly to any who oppose the EPRDF.

The party program quite bluntly does not stand equally for the rights of both the people and the ruling classes. The democratic rights of the masses are listed and include a roster of human rights and due process protections, but the document makes clear that When we say that all citizens' democratic rights will be respected in the future socio-political system, it doesn't mean that Revolutionary Democracy will stand equally for the rights of the masses and the ruling classes. Our support is always for the rights of the masses only.⁶

That support would be backed up by a restructured and integrated defense force "to carry out the required revolutionary democratic tasks through indirect ties" to the EPRDF. Thus the "new army" of the FDRE would be free and neutral in appearance, but it really would be an arm of the EPRDF to "protect the constitution and the rights of the masses" (the party line and those who

toe it). The government's army and security forces, then, would have a free hand in crushing any citizens who attempt "to obstruct the exercise of the rights of the masses" (i.e., disagree with the EPRDF or the government). That is exactly what the forces of the state, with its monopoly of power, have done. And without an independent judiciary to protect the due process rights of the accused, human rights abuses of individuals or members of organizations expressing opposition to the government, that lacks popular sovereignty to begin with, are legion. Highly respected international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, among others, report extrajudicial arrests, torture, disappearances, and murder carried on by the government of Ethiopia.

Another aspect of the EPRDF's strategy is to establish a governing system of ethnic federalism emphasizing rights of "nations, nationalities, and peoples." This high-sounding principle, cribbed from Lenin, is more Machiavellian than Wilsonian however. If the outnumbered Tigrayans who direct the EPRDF/FDRE can keep other ethnic groups divided and roiled against each other in ethnozenophobias or content to manage affairs in their own limited bailiwicks, then larger matters can be subsumed by the one governing party. Thus, what the EPRDF views as the false ideology of nationalism for a "Greater Ethiopia" can be kept in check and its proponents divided and conquered.

Ethnic hatreds spawned by this scheme are the source of most human rights abuses in Ethiopia. This point was driven home to me by tragic experiences of Ethiopians in some thirty political asylum cases in which I served as an expert witness during the past two years. In almost all cases, ethnicity played a role in the claimants being arbitrarily arrested, incarcerated without charge or trial, and brutally tortured by security forces of the government.⁷

In most instances, the perpetrators of these indecencies verbally abused the claimants because of their ethnicity even while torturing them. In carrying out hate crimes against ethnic and political "others," the EPRDF security forces, with the full panoply of state power behind them, perpetrate unspeakable moral outrages against fellow Ethiopians. With power corrupting, and absolute power, which is what security personnel enjoy, corrupting absolutely, the EPRDF cadre and their collaborators are ruled by a malevolent spirit, what the Germans call "der innere Schweinhund," or the evil spirit within.

In oppressive actions against their countrymen, EPRDF security forces exhibit the symptoms of "Syndrome E," a blood-lust characterized by killing without emotion, identified by Dr. Itzak Fried of the UCLA Brain Institute.⁸ According to Fried, Syndrome E is a kind of "cognitive fracture" that often proves contagious. It provides a sense of elation around violence and transforms nonviolent people into killing automatons who attack women and children without remorse or pity. Syndrome E is characterized by repetitive violence, obsessive ideas, group reinforcement and a psychological "compartmentalization" that allows sufferers to detach themselves emotionally from their deeds. All of these characteristics are present in the human rights abuses of torture and worst punishments meted out by EPRDF security forces.

Furthermore, according to medical clinicians with extensive experience in the treatment of torture-related trauma, it is difficult for torture victims to heal, to surmount their experiences, if the torturers are regarded by the society or world at large as exercising legitimate political authority⁹--as the FDRE/EPRDF would have people believe. Unfortunately, in Ethiopia, the torturers can continue their work with impunity and even with world sanction--all in the name of ethnic federal democracy. Thoughtful analysts worry about how many years it will take to heal this divisive pathology spread throughout the land by a diseased body politic.

In Ethiopia, the world is witnessing ethnicity gone awry. The division of Ethiopia into ethnic administrative regions was mandated by an EPRDF government and written into a new constitution approved by faux elections. The idea of ethnic federalism did not originate from the

people nor did they approve of it in free and fair elections. In light of events in Rwanda, the Congo, and the former Yugoslavia, it is doubtful that any people willingly would subject themselves to the horrors of state-enforced ethnic warfare. In Ethiopia, the people have not been given the opportunity so to choose at the grass roots level, and until they do, ethnic federalism must be viewed as an artificial system imposed from above.

Instead of ethnicity referring to cultural-linguistic communal groups, built around ties of real or putative kinship, taking pride in the in-group, common consciousness and identity of the group--as is the case in most multi-ethnic societies--under the FDRE, cultural prejudice and social discrimination against "others" has been encouraged and perverted into denying others basic human and economic rights. This ethnicity run wild exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, and sharply divides races and nationalities. Mutual suspicion and hostility are bound to emerge in a society bent on defining itself in terms of such jostling and competing groups.¹⁰

In ethnic kilils, or homelands, nominally ruled by front parties of the EPRDF, but actually dominated by the central party,¹¹ officials ruthlessly use political dominance, economic exploitation, and psychological oppression to drive out members of other ethnic groups who may have lived in the regions for decades--or to make life miserable for those who remain. Under the color of law, conflict and violence have been whipped up in response to imaginary threats from ethnic outsiders. As a result, the cult of ethnicity has produced adverse effects on the peace, harmony, and integration of the nation's society. The endgame of such identity politics is self-pity and self-ghettoization, and ultimately, political instability. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has noted: "The meanness generated when one group is set against another, the 'built-in we-they syndrome' has caused more dominating, fearing, hating, killing than any other single cause since time began."¹²

The EPRDF's recipe for the alchemy that changes prejudice into human rights abuse, torture, and murder can be observed in the party's history of fostering inter-ethnic hatred since it came to power in 1991. There are four basic ingredients.

First, history. A historic grievance is kept festering by the retelling of events, real or imagined, that puts another ethnic group in a bad light. Perhaps this ploy is more significant where the oral tradition is still vital in communications. EPRDF cadres and their servitors skillfully stir up the most sensitive memories of lingering antagonisms long after the people who were offended are gone. Ethnic resentment of conquerors or rulers of decades or centuries ago is remembered as if events happened yesterday. The memory is honed by bitterness over perceived government favoritism toward one group or the other in the past or currently. Such resentment breeds resentment, hatred fuels hatred, and the resulting animosities generate flights from neighborliness and largeheartedness necessary for a commonwealth.

The second ingredient is contempt. One group perceives the other as dirty, slothful, deceitful. The besmirched return contempt for contempt: the accusers are arrogant, devious, aggressive, and mean spirited. This animus is fueled by members of both groups characterizing those of the other in terms dripping with bigoted contempt. When Ethiopians, with a natural bent for talk, go on a *chikachikÿ* binge of verbal verbosity aimed at the "other," the brine of hostile criticism is further agitated.

Contempt also is exacerbated by what the author Solomon Deressa calls the inability of Ethiopians to hear one another coupled with "the demonic pride" Ethiopians take in their contempt for the "other." According to Solomon, if an Ethiopian says to a member of another ethnic group, "Your father burned my house down and my only child died in the fire," his or her knee-jerk response is likely to be, "How dare you? Since when do the likes of you have the right to mention the likes of my father?"¹³ This belligerence, even in the face of basic human pain, is

bound to have direct impact on intensifying old animosities, and the EPRDF, with skills honed on the battlefield, well knows how to aggravate this weakness.

The third ingredient of the hateful brew is poison. To move any ethnic group, say, Tigreans, from disliking another, say, Amharas, to fighting them requires another ingredient--a toxin. If the leader of a political party identified with a particular ethnic group, such as the All Amhara Peoples Organization (AAPO), can be convicted of plotting to overthrow the government, regardless of how trumped up the charges or how spurious the trial, the toxin of inter-ethnic hatred will be swallowed by the gullible. The horrors inflicted on those protesting the incarceration of Dr. Asrat Woldeyes, president of the AAPO, in the Central High Court in Addis Ababa in September 1994 is a classic example of officially condoned poisoning that spread throughout the country to the point that the AAPO and its surviving members are but a shell, a remnant of what was a strong and growing political party. Party regulars have been harassed, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered¹⁴--and the cause of their persecution ultimately can be traced to their ethnicity. Similar poisons have been plentifully stirred into the mixture by the astute actions of EPRDF cadres.¹⁵

The fourth component of the mixture of calumny is domination. Ever since the EPRDF set itself up as the dominant power in the Transitional Government, there has been domination by one ethnic group over others. This is the case whether carried out by the Woyane in the central government or by its surrogates in the regions. The regional governments controlled by EPRDF ethnic front parties were set up to provide domination by one group at the expense of all others in the kilil, a cynical and resentful closing off of others. Such domination generates the pernicious corrosion of resentment that prods concern and foreboding. The dominant group requires that you recognize that we have nothing in common with one another. The result has been governmental licensing of oppression and the denial of human rights to the "others."

Thus, in Ethiopia, the recipe for the culture of mistrust that changes prejudice into murder can be observed-- history, contempt, poison, and domination by one group¹⁶--all contributing to the revulsion coefficient of the nation.

With the genie of ethnic distrust out of the bottle, with a number of Ethiopians actuated by a common passion adverse to the rights of other citizens or to the aggregate interests of the community, what can be done to control their effects? What answer is there to the contention that ethnic pride, the identity of groups, and exclusiveness of its members is "born in the bone?" Can virtue be found in the current exposure of ethnic animosities?

The Ethiopians' answers to these questions will shape the future of the nation. To give the devil his due, the present regime has exposed every possible negative feeling of oppression and human suffering inflicted by one group upon another in the past. All the cards are on the table. What is the next play? Does the nation continue its ethnic dance macabre with its resultant spirit of gloom? Or can lessons learned produce a society where the Ethiopian's "Schweinhund within" is replaced by "ein gutter Geist, ein bessres Ich," a good spirit, a better person?

There can be a benevolent side to ethnic belonging, a positive appreciation of one's own social roots in a community and cultural group without necessarily disparaging other groups. Ethnicity can provide material as well as emotional support networks for individuals in society. Identifying with an ethnic group fosters a sense of belonging as part of an intermediate level of social relationships between the individual and society.¹⁷

There also can be a democratic side of ethnicity: the rights of members of each ethnic group to be secure in their lives and property, as well as secure from arbitrary arrest and punishment, and for them to enjoy equal opportunity in real terms in trade, business, employment, schooling, and the enjoyment of social amenities. Democratic ethnicity recognizes equal rights of

all ethnic groups, and is a tool in the fight against privilege and nepotism.¹⁸

Benevolent ethnicity can be attenuated by the development of a public culture of a democratic society committed to seeking forms of social cooperation which can be pursued on a basis of mutual respect between free and equal persons. This cooperation does not imply the coordination of social activity by the government, but simply involves the acceptance of certain common procedures to regulate political conduct. It must also contain "fair terms specifying the basic rights and duties of citizens within society, so that the benefits produced by everyone's efforts are distributed fairly between generations over time."¹⁹ Such a common adherence to ideals of democracy and human rights is precisely what has held the American people together in the absence of a common ethnic origin.²⁰

Democracy in Ethiopia will require institutions and laws, but it also will depend on what might be called democratic dispositions. These include a preparedness to work with others different from oneself toward shared goals; a combination of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one cannot always get everything one wants; and "a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or of one small group alone."²¹

Ethiopia, then, must liberate itself from the stifling past and enter into a new era with an interweaving of separate ethnic strands into a new national design. To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of ethnic factions, and at the same time to create a truly democratic government, is the great object to which freedom-loving Ethiopians should direct their thoughts and their individual actions. Until democratic principles, norms, values, and procedures are constantly applied in Ethiopia, human rights will not be protected. The record of the FDRE demonstrates that these standards are not being met and that human rights suffer accordingly.

NOTES

Throughout this paper, the EPRDF, an umbrella group for other affiliated ethnic parties, is cited rather than referring to specific EPRDF "members," including, most importantly, the Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO).

1. "TPLF/EPRDF Congresses Wound up without Addressing Crucial Political Issues," Ethiopian Register, February 1998, p. 13.
2. Aryeh Neier, "Human Rights," in Joel Krieger (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 401-403.
3. Paul B. Henze, *Ethiopia in 1991--Peace Through Struggle*, Washington, D.C., RAND, 1991, p-7743, p. 3.
4. See, e.g., *The International Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Prisoners of Conscience, Unraveling Human Rights' Abuses in Ethiopia, Proceedings of a Human Rights Week Observance and Electronic Mail Conference 3-8 March, 1997* (Medford, MA: ISCEPC, 1997); Theodore M. Vestal, "Deficits of Democracy in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia Since 1991," in Harold G. Marcus, ed., *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies, Vol. 2* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994), pp. 188-204.
5. "TPLF/EPRDF's Strategies for Establishing its Hegemony & Perpetuating its Rule," English translation of TPLF/EPRDF document published in June 1993, Ethiopian Register, June

1996, pp. 20-29.

6. Ibid.

7. Theodore M. Vestal, "Documented Sacrifice: The Experience of Young Ethiopians Now Seeking Political Asylum Abroad," *Ethiopian Register*, August 1997, pp. 30-33.

8. Joby Warrick, "Psychology: Syndrome Suspected in Genocidal Acts," *Washington Post*, 29 Dec 97, p. A02.

9. Jack Saul, "Forgotten in the Hoopla: Tibet's Young Torture Victims," *New York Times*, 1 November 1997, p. A29.

10. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1992), p. 112.

11. See, the English translation of the guidelines of one of the supreme bodies of the EPRDF Central Committee, Dirijitawi Ma'ekel, "EPRDF's Organizational Structure & Operation," Part I, *Ethiopian Register*, September 1997, pp. 16-19; Part II, October 1997, pp. 18-22; Part III, November 1997, pp. 18-21; Part IV, December 1997, pp. 22- 27; Part V, January 1998, pp. 20-24; Part VI-Final, March 1998, pp. 18, 20-22, 24.

12. Schlesinger, p. 110.

13. Solomon Deressa, "The Poem and Its Matrix," in *Silence is Not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*, ed. Tadesse Adera and Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994), p. 177.

14. For reports of harassment of AAPO, see Moreshe 2,3,4 especially Apr/May, July/Aug, Aug/Sep, Dec 1994; Aug, Oct/Nov 1995; Neka Tibebe, "Speech," *Andinet*, 1 February 1997, p. 3.

15. Human rights abuses against Oromos and especially members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) are documented in *Sagalee Haaraa*, the newsletter of the Oromia Support Group.

16. Credit for the recipe for turning prejudice into murder belongs to A.M. Rosenthal in describing what happened in India during communal rioting following destruction of a mosque in Ayodhya in 7 December 1992; see, "The Alchemists of Murder," *New York Times*, 2 March 1993, p. A21.

17. Okwudiba Nnoli, "Ethnicity," in Joel Krieger (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 280-284.

18. Ibid.

19. John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, XIV, (1985), pp. 223-51.

20. Schlesinger, p. 118.

21. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 2.