

State and Nationality in Ethiopia: The Search for New Pathways

A Dialogue on Nation-Building took place in Bishoftu, Ethiopia, on January 14-16, 2018. I was one of a dozen individuals invited to serve as resource persons for this meeting of over a hundred representatives from the government, civil society, political and faith-based organizations. The aim of the gathering was to identify pathways for overcoming the country's severe political problems. Before a second round could be convened, Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn resigned and a state of emergency was re-imposed. Accompanying these developments was the release of several hundred individuals imprisoned for a variety of political offenses. This revised version of my presentation is a modest contribution to the challenging process on which Ethiopia has embarked to build a more inclusive, democratic, and peaceful nation.

I took part in several meetings three decades ago involving opposing sides in the prolonged wars in Ethiopia, and what became Eritrea, as an associate of former U.S. president Jimmy Carter. Even after the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in May 1991, these peace-building exercises continued at the Carter Center in Atlanta and elsewhere.¹ We are again invited to help build a platform for peace, security, stability, inclusive growth, and democratic development in this extraordinary country.

Ethiopia, I believe, can still become a leader in Africa, and indeed the world, in several spheres. One of these is the forging of nationhood through the acknowledgement of cultural diversity. The gist of this idea can be conveyed by switching the usual phrase "unity-in-diversity" to "diversity-in-unity". The following quote from an essay on the Soviet experience captures this paradox and challenge: "Given the ethnic, religious, and social diversity of the peoples of tsarist Russia and the USSR, it was difficult to create out of that demographic mosaic a cohesive and convincing idea of a shared national identity."² That Soviet project eventually failed and was followed by the emergence of fifteen independent countries. But the quest continues in other lands. Canada is a country whose national identity emphasizes, indeed celebrates, cultural diversity. Among developing nations, South Africa has made "rainbow nation" a plausible concept despite persistent racial fissures.

¹ A comprehensive effort to study these events, and make relevant documents available, has begun.

² Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Empire that dare not speak its name: Making nations in the Soviet state," *Current History*, Vol. 116, No. 792 (October 2017), p. 252.

A modern Ethiopian nation is being constructed by the people themselves as they seek economic progress, migrate, intermarry, and interact in myriad other ways. Government authorities can establish the architecture and infrastructure to facilitate these processes which, in turn, would dissuade Ethiopian citizens from fleeing across borders and braving awful risks to reach Europe as citizens of neighboring countries. Despite the multiple ongoing conflicts in the region - and in Ethiopia itself - a safe, secure, and inclusive nation seems attainable within Ethiopia's border.



Nations emerge from evolutionary processes as well as strategic actions. Force can start the process, but it cannot complete it. President Abraham Lincoln used force to end the Civil War, but he also pioneered major improvements in the waterways and the railroads that facilitated the construction of a continental nation. President Franklin D. Roosevelt led the fight against Nazi Germany and its allies in World War II, but he also initiated a tremendous leap forward in

national inclusion by introducing social security and other major domestic reforms. President Dwight Eisenhower expanded the grid of nationhood with the creation of the interstate highway network, an achievement that complements his immense contributions as Allied Commander in World War II.

Viewed from the perspective of such accomplishments, Ethiopia has come far during the past quarter-century as a state-nation.³ It can go further in building an inclusive, democratic, and economically-successful one. There is perhaps no large African nation better placed to achieve this goal in the next quarter-century. Where Ethiopia has proven resourceful and resilient, it must bolster these achievements. Where it has experienced reverses, for example in the conduct of elections, it can address these failures frankly and consensually.

The word “consensual” appears frequently in Prof. Christopher Clapham’s excellent new book.⁴ He also served as one of the resource persons for the Dialogue, Consensual practices contributed to military success in the asymmetric war against a well-armed Ethiopian government. And they facilitated the maintenance of cohesion among the core governing elements since 1991. Yet it is also recognized that the governing structures must evolve, especially in light of the 2015-2017 political upheavals. At the Carter Center in February 1994, a major attempt was made to create a platform for building a democratic and inclusive Ethiopian polity. Although the exercise ultimately failed, it did influence many who participated and who are still active politically. Out of the embers of that process, and others attempted so far, the key elements of an inclusive democratic order can be assembled. The next phase of making Ethiopia a mid-level state in the global economy, with improved infrastructures, and attracting long-horizon private investments, depends on the expansion of political space and wider socio-cultural expression and representation.

At the meeting of the Working Committee for this initiative on January 15, 2017, I told my colleagues that Ethiopia can be a breakthrough nation in Africa and the world. Since the political transitions of the late 1980s, I have known only one major breakthrough nation on the

³ For the use of this formulation, see Richard Joseph, “Nation-State Trajectories in Africa,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (winter/spring 2003).

⁴ *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

African continent: Ghana.⁵ A comprehensive transition has taken place in this West African country from entrenched military rule to a political system in which former autocratic elements (political, military, and intelligence) have been integrated.



Despite strong ethnic and other sectional identities, Ghanaian nationhood has flourished. These attributes can be mutually reinforcing. Nigeria, a country I have studied closely and written about, continues to struggle. There are renewed demands, under the rubric of “neo-Biafra”, among segments of the Igbo community in the southeast. Elsewhere in the south, insistent demands are made for further devolution of power from the federal center under the rubric of “restructuring”.⁶ In an edited volume of my writings on Nigeria since 1977, I am using the concepts of “conglomerate nation” and “conglomerate governance” to capture the persistent quest in Nigeria to effectuate group identities in a sovereign nation.⁷

⁵ There may be others, such as Namibia, but I do not know enough about their political economies.

⁶ A Committee on Restructuring of the All Progressives Congress, the governing party in Nigeria chaired by the reformist governor of Kaduna state, Nasir El-Rufai, submitted in January 2018 a report on its deliberations. Some of the same issues were taken up in 2014 by a national conference during the the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan.

⁷ *The Nigerian Crucible*, Arch Library, Northwestern University
https://arch.library.northwestern.edu/collections/rb68xb902?utf8=%E2%9C%93&sort=system_create_dtsi+asc&per_page=20j



Outgoing Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn

While conducting research on Nigerian politics in the late 1970s, Malam Turi Muhammadu, Managing Director of the newspaper, *The New Nigerian*, told me in an interview: “Whatever the provisions of the 1979 federal constitution, never forget that Nigeria is fundamentally a *cultural* federation.” In other words, Nigeria is a conglomerate nation, made up of peoples with profound ethnic, regional, religious, and cultural identities. While these identities evolve, they do not dissolve into one homogeneous national identity. The political system must allow for, and incorporate, their vibrancy.⁸

Ethno-federalism in Ethiopia is an important, though contested, model for governing a conglomerate nation. The system’s contradictions, inequities, and distortions remain to be seriously tackled. Such a process must necessarily be very collaborative. Other countries such as Switzerland have pursued constitutional engineering to achieve multicultural, multi-ethnic, and

⁸ Scholars who wrote seminal articles on this fundamental issue are Peter Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1975), and Richard Sklar, “The African Frontier for Political Science,” in Robert Bates et al., *Africa & the Disciplines* (University of Chicago Press, 1993). Major contributions to the understanding of politics and ethnicity in Africa can also be found in the writings of Nigerian scholars, Eghosa Osaghae and Rotimi Suberu, and others.

multi-lingual federations that are today fully constitutional in nature and in which individual and group rights are respected..

As Christopher Clapham shows, Ethiopia must pursue diversity-in-unity via a nation-building route than differs from the one bequeathed by European colonialism to most African countries. The current Ethiopian government recognizes that the way forward can no longer be based on top-down directives. There are too many complexities to resolve. This symposium demonstrates that the process can draw on lessons from different pathways pursued elsewhere. At the African Economic Conference in Addis Ababa on December 4, 2017, Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam stated that the world was experiencing a period of relative autonomy on issues of ideology, economic policy, and political structure. I agree.

Just as nation-building can be a bottom-up process, so too can the crafting of a way out of the current political impasse, benefit from the percolation of new ideas in arenas such as this symposium. The most promising ones can be carried forward for further debate within the nation, the diaspora, and the country's governmental structures and political organizations.

Richard Joseph

The following insightful remarks coincide with my thoughts. They are taken from the presentations by other resource persons.

Kasahun Berhanu⁹:

“...intensive interactions between different peoples and cultures mediated by migrations, intermarriages, displacements and settlements, interface between belief and value systems, and mutual and reciprocal socio-economic relations culminated in the evolution of contemporary Ethiopian society.”

Yet, Ethiopians have failed at “transforming such a proud historical legacy and sense of common belonging into a durable nation-building project.”

Zeresenay Alemseged: “nations are always in gestation”

⁹ Berhanu is a Professor of Political Science of the University of Addis Ababa; Alemseged is a Professor of Paleoanthropology at the University of Chicago; Olukoshi is Regional Director of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA); and Cheru is a Senior Research Fellow of Leiden University, Holland, and an Emeritus Professor of American University, Washington, DC.

Adebayo Olukoshi:

“Nation-building need not be a top-down and elitist project. We can put aside the notion of ‘homogenizing’ peoples, and of nations as defined by majority groups. Nation-building requires persistent investment, consent, legitimacy, and participation.”

Fantu Cheru:

“ At the heart of nationhood in Scandinavia is the social contract, the avoidance of marginalization, and of individuals and groups feeling left-out and left-behind. There is no hierarchy of rights: political, economic, and cultural. Managing diversity and differences is a difficult, never-ending project.”