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NATIONALISM UNBOUND: THE HORN OF AFRICA REVISITED

Marina Ottaway

The politics of the Horn of Africa has been dominated for three decades by conflicting nationalisms. During the 1970s and early 1980s, however, the commitment to Marxism-Leninism of the Somali regime of Mohammed Siad Barre, the military government of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia, and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) received more attention. To most Western countries the Soviet presence was worrisome, while conflicting nationalisms were seen as important only where they offered opportunities for Soviet penetration. Bound by the commitment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to respect the continent's colonial boundaries, most foreign governments did not believe that the territorial status quo should be modified. The Soviet Union also tended to consider nationalism as a phenomenon of secondary importance, which could be overridden by the common commitment to Marxism-Leninism of governments and political movements in the region. Relying on Fidel Castro as its emissary, the Soviet Union suggested in 1977 that the conflicts between Eritrea and Ethiopia and between Somalia and Ethiopia

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could be solved simultaneously by the formation of a Red Sea federation of Marxist-Leninist states. The suggestion was rejected by all sides.[1]

Eventually, socialism faded away completely and nationalism triumphed. In January 1991, President Siad Barre was ousted and Somalia disintegrated into a chaos of warring clans and factions. In May, President Mengistu Haile Mariam fled the country after the Ethiopian army collapsed under the onslaught of not only the EPLF, but also of a much newer movement, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and of lesser ethnic liberation movements allied with it. Furthermore, the demise of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union made it extremely unlikely that future governments in the Horn would turn to socialism again. Nationalism became the dominant ideology of the region, replacing Marxism-Leninism as the organizing principle of emerging political systems in Eritrea and Ethiopia, but leading to the virtual disappearance of the Somali state.

The triumph of nationalism did not ensure a more peaceful or democratic future for the area. On the contrary, it risked leading to a new period of strife as destructive as the one that preceded it. The consequences of unchecked and escalating micronationalism were already manifest in Somalia. It was not a foregone conclusion that Ethiopia could avoid chaos and possibly disintegration, although the government had decided to tackle the problem of ethnic nationalism openly, rather than trying to suppress it as Mengistu had done. Eritrea, de facto independent although still nominally part of Ethiopia, was taking the opposite route. Following in the footsteps of earlier Ethiopian and indeed of most African regimes, the EPLF insisted on an all-inclusive, Pan-Eritrean nationalism, refusing to accept the legitimacy of ethnic consciousness despite the pluralism of its population and despite the fact that for years it had done its best to encourage and support the development of ethnic movements in Ethiopia.

Nationalism was central to the politics of the Horn, but it had very different meanings and different implications in each country—for simplicity's sake, and anticipating the probable final outcome, we will refer here to Eritrea as a country. Indeed, after the collapse of the former socialist regimes there were three conflicting nationalisms side by side in the Horn of Africa. One was the Pan-Eritrean nationalism of the EPLF, which embraced the entire former Italian colony despite the ethnic and religious differences that divided its population. The second was the government-supported ethnic nationalism favored by Ethiopia's new

1. See John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 228–29; and Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 205.

rulers. It had aspects both of respect for genuine demands for self-determination and of a South African-style Bantustan policy in which ethnicity is not chosen, but imposed by the government. The third was the micronationalism of the clans that led to the collapse of the Somali state—which in essence only continued to exist because the international society is not equipped with mechanisms to declare that a territory has lapsed into a non-state condition.

Two questions will be raised here about these nationalisms. First, is there an inevitable progression from country-wide nationalism to ethnic nationalism, and finally to ever more local claims, until the Somali situation is duplicated elsewhere? And second, is the Horn a unique case in Africa, or is the triumph of nationalism there just a prelude to what may happen in the rest of the continent?

The Problem of Nationalism in Africa

All nationalisms share the claim that a specific group of people constitutes a natural unit with a legitimate and inalienable right to self-determination—that is, not only the right to elect its government, but also the right to a separate country.[2] But nationalisms differ in the way in which they define the group that has such an inherent right to self-determination. The sharing of language and culture, or of a common distant or recent history can be used to support the claim that a certain group constitutes a nation, and thus has the right to its own territory and state. All definitions are political and to a very large extent arbitrary. Nations do not exist except as the result of a political choice in a specific historical context.

In the case of Africa, two conflicting strains of nationalism have been present from the late colonial period to the present. One is a nationalism determined by European conquest, embracing all people living within the boundaries of a specific colony. The nation thus defined is acknowledged to be a recent construct, going back only a few decades when the independence movements started in Africa. There is no pretense that it was forged into a homogeneous cultural entity by a long shared past. Alongside this country nationalism embracing entire colonies, there existed from the beginning, and continue to exist now, other narrower nationalisms, embracing not an entire country, but a

2. On the ambiguities of the concept of self-determination, see Crawford Young, "Self-Determination, Territorial Integrity, and the African State System," in Francis M. Deng and I. William Zartman, eds., *Conflict Resolution in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991), pp. 320–46.

particular area of it, or a region spreading across colonial borders into different countries. This ethnic nationalism finds its justification in the supposed sharing of history, language and culture among members of a group. In reality, ethnic nationalism is often no less arbitrary, and in many cases no older, than the country nationalism of the independence movements. Kikuyu nationalism in Kenya or Zulu nationalism in South Africa, for example, also developed from the encounter between Africans and Europeans. In some cases, ethnic nationalism was even deliberately encouraged and manipulated by the colonial authorities, playing one part of the population against another in order to strengthen their control.[3]

Despite the fundamental arbitrariness of both the broad country nationalism embracing the entire colony and the narrower ethnic nationalism of separatist groups, the two came to be perceived as very different. In and out of Africa, country nationalism was seen as a modern phenomenon, and it was eventually recognized not only as inevitable, but as legitimate as well. This was a good nationalism. Ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, was bad. It was not modern, but backward looking and narrow minded. In other words, it was tribalism.

This was not just a perception of foreign scholars, but it became the dominant assumption shared by African governments. From its inception, the Organization of African Unity gave its blessing to country nationalism, proclaiming that the colonial borders of the newly independent countries should be respected. It thus denied the legitimacy of ethnic movements, while at the same time supporting liberation organizations in all remaining colonies. There was a paradox here, in that the organization symbolizing the new, independent Africa embraced the idea that the only legitimate African nations were those created by Europe. But nations, as we argued earlier, are political constructs, and politically the OAU position was seen as the one most likely to minimize conflict on the continent and, not incidentally, to safeguard the interests of incumbent governments.

Country and Ethnic Nationalism in the Horn

In the Horn of Africa, both types of nationalism were present from the beginning of the post-colonial period. Making things more difficult, the lines between the two were not clear cut. First there was the problem

3. On the issue of ethnic and country nationalism in Africa, see Donald Rothchild and Victor Olorunsola, eds., *The State Vs. Ethnic Claims* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983).

of Ethiopia, which defied easy classification under the categories outlined above. Ethiopia was different from other African countries, because its borders were not imposed by Europe, but achieved by Ethiopian emperors through conquest and through negotiations with the colonial powers. In the early days of decolonization, this characteristic made Ethiopia a powerful symbol of African independence, but later it decreased the legitimacy of the country's borders. Efforts to promote country nationalism, laudable in other African countries, were seen as imperialism in Ethiopia. Boundaries imposed by the European powers through conquest were perceived as legitimate, while those established by Ethiopia by the same means and in the same period were not. Ethiopia was also different because in 1952 it had annexed, as the result of a United Nations decision, Eritrea, which had long historical ties to the Ethiopian empire, but had been detached from it when it became an Italian colony.[4]

Second, there was the problem of Somalia, also difficult to classify. In the first place, colonial boundaries were not respected when Somalia became independent. Rather, two separate colonial entities, Italian Somalia and British Somaliland were merged on the ground that the inhabitants of both shared language and culture. Thus the Somali state was built on ethnic criteria, rather than simply defined by the accidents of colonial conquest. This encouraged the growth of Pan-Somali nationalism. If a shared ethnic and cultural identity was sufficient to cause the merger of two separate colonies, it should be sufficient also to justify the annexation of all other Somali-inhabited territories. The new government thus put forward a claim to the Ethiopian Ogaden, the Northern Frontier District of Kenya and the French Territory of the Afars and Issas (which became independent in 1977 as the Republic of Djibouti).[5]

The complicated nationalisms of Somalia and Ethiopia manifested themselves early in the 1960s, when the rest of Africa was dominated by country nationalism and ethnic claims were frowned upon everywhere. Eritrean liberation movements first started organizing in 1961, and in 1964 Somalia launched, and lost in a few days, the first war against Ethiopia to gain control of the Ogaden. Since then, nationalism has never abated. Despite a military coup in Somalia and a revolution in Ethiopia, it did not lose its importance, and finally triumphed in 1991, threatening to drag the area into a new series of crises.

4. See Haggai Ehrlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962–1978* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), especially chapter 1.

5. On Somali nationalism see I. M. Lewis, "Pan-Africanism and Pan-Somalism," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 1, 1963, pp. 147–61.

Eritrea

Eritrea, the EPLF and other liberation movements argued, was not a region trying to secede from Ethiopia, but a former colony trying to exercise the right to self-determination that had been unjustly denied to it in the past. The United Nations decision in 1952 to make it part of Ethiopia, although with a degree of regional autonomy in a federal system, had not been justified in terms of the organization's charter because it denied Eritreans the fundamental right to choose for themselves. From the beginning, thus, the Eritreans were careful to put their case in the framework of the decolonization of Africa, and to avoid challenging the OAU's principle that colonial borders should be respected. Eritrea was a unique case, the EPLF tried to reassure African countries, and accepting its independence did not imply condoning secession. Eritrea was not Biafra.

The EPLF's argument that the issue of Eritrea was one of decolonization had other implications. It was not simply a signal to African governments that they could support the Eritrean cause without worrying about the implications for their own country, but also a signal to groups within Eritrea that the only permissible nationalism was a Pan-Eritrean one. The former colony had to become an independent country within the boundaries established by Italy. The Eritrean nation was composed of everybody who lived within those borders. It was a diverse population in terms of language, culture, and religion: Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, Afar and Saho speakers; farmers and pastoralists; Christian highlanders and Moslem lowlanders. Britain, which administered Eritrea after the Italian defeat in 1941, had found the population so diverse that it had even suggested partition, giving the highlands to Ethiopia and the lowlands to the Sudan, on the assumption that the populations of the two areas had more in common with those of the neighboring countries than with each other.[6]

But to the EPLF, these diverse groups constituted one nation, united by a common history and a common identity. Diversity was best handled by being ignored. It was the same position taken by other African countries at the time of independence. The position of the EPLF was explained clearly by Issaias Afewerki, secretary-general of the organization, in an interview with the EPLF's radio service about a year before the collapse of the Mengistu regime. The future Eritrea, argued Issaias, must have a democratic, multiparty system. But not all parties could be tolerated in a heterogeneous society: ". . . if there are internal or external

6. G. K. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* (London, Oxford University Press, 1960).

forces that seek to foment tribal or ethnic differences—and if the political parties become the flagships of these tendencies—the result will be debilitating instability and civil strife . . . Religious parties in Eritrea would, sooner or later, spark civil strife and hence jeopardize national unity. So . . . there must be a ban on religious political parties. The same rule should apply to regional and ethnic movements."[7] Issaias' words echoed countless almost identical statements made by African leaders in the past.

However, regarding Ethiopia the EPLF had long taken a very different position. Ethnic nationalism there was to be encouraged and supported. The reason was simple. The Eritreans' chances of winning their struggle were limited if Ethiopia remained stable and united. Guerrilla movements are notoriously difficult to suppress, but they also have difficulty controlling territory on a permanent basis—and thus winning an outright military victory—unless the opponent's willingness to fight is sapped. Pan-Ethiopian nationalism thus must be undermined by ethnic nationalism in order to destroy the army's resolve. When the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie revived the centrifugal forces of the empire, the EPLF did its best to support and encourage ethnic movements. Interestingly, however, it never looked at these movements as its equals. The EPLF continued to argue that Eritrea was different, a unique case of a region with a legitimate claim to independence because of its colonial history. Other movements like the Tigrean People's Liberation Front or the Oromo Liberation Front were engaged in a different struggle, because their history did not provide them with a similar right to independence. Nevertheless, the EPLF encouraged them and, particularly in the case of TPLF, it provided military assistance.

Ethiopia

The issue of ethnic nationalism was particularly complex in Ethiopia, because a grey area divided the centrifugal tendencies typical of all empires from more contemporary brands of nationalism. The ancient empire was historically made unstable by the tension existing between emperor and regional rulers. As a result its territory varied in size, depending on the political skill of the incumbent emperor and the power of the armies he could muster on one side, and the ability and strength of the regional rulers on the other. There was nothing unique to Ethiopia in this situation—it was the common history of all empires. And it would

7. Cited in *Africa News* 34.3–4 (November 12, 1990).

be inaccurate, indeed anachronistic, to talk of nationalism as the force that threatened the power of the emperor. It was competition for power among rulers, not the existence of mass-based movements inspired by an ideology of self-determination, that made the empire unstable. The early nineteenth century period of disintegration of the Ethiopian empire was indeed the "age of the princes," not the age of nationalism.

At the turn of the century, two developments took place simultaneously. A strong emperor established control over large new territories to the south of the historical core, and European penetration in the region made the new borders permanent. Having acquired internationally recognized boundaries, the empire initially remained exposed to all the old centrifugal forces. But by the 1960s Haile Selassie appeared to have solved the problem by suppressing regional rulers, forming a modern standing army, and organizing a rudimentary bureaucratic administration. It was symbolic of the transformation that when the emperor was overthrown, he did not fall victim to the machinations of feudal landlords but to the plague threatening the leaders of contemporary Africa, a military coup d'état.

Centrifugal forces nevertheless persisted, not in the traditional form of feudal resistance to central control, but in the modern form of ethnic nationalist movements. The process of transformation of one into the other is an important issue historians have started exploring, and on which much more work needs to be done.[8] It is clear, however, that the first nationalist stirrings were manifested in the 1960s not only in Eritrea but also among the Somalis and Oromos of Bale (which includes part of the Ogaden), and that by the late 1970s they had become a major threat not only to the Mengistu regime, but also to the integrity of the country.

The rise to power of the military regime generated intense opposition from many quarters. But whereas the radical movements challenging the military *Derg* for control over a united Ethiopia were defeated by 1977, eventually to become only marginal exiled groups, the ethnic liberation movements multiplied and prospered.[9] The most important was the TPLF, but three other deserve mentioning here, because they still exist

8. See, for example, Gebru Tereke, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Peasant Mobilization: The Cases of Bale and Tigray," in Marina Ottaway, ed., *The Political Economy of Ethiopia* (New York: Praeger, 1990), pp. 137–55; and Gebru Tereke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

9. The most important of these two groups were the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which opposed the military regime since its formation, and The All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON), that collaborated with it until 1977. Both were almost eliminated by the late 1970s, barely to survive as exiled movements. In 1991, the two were allied in a new organization, the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF), which took a strong stand against the new government, but appeared far too weak to have an impact on future political developments in Ethiopia.

in the early 1990s and can be expected to remain important in the future: the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) and the Afar Liberation Front (ALF).

The Oromo Liberation Front was potentially the most important of the ethnic movements, but in practice it had little success. Two reasons appear to account for this: the nature of the Oromo population and the organizational problems of the movement. The Oromos are the largest group in the southern part of Ethiopia, including the region around Addis Ababa. But the vastness of this area, the different influences to which it has been exposed, and a northward migratory pattern along the eastern escarpment into Welo and even Tigray have made them into a very diverse group.[10] The Oromo movement as a result could not find a unifying symbol around which all could rally. Southern Ethiopia shared a common experience of conquest and occupation by Emperor Menelik's armies, but this did not set Oromos aside from other groups in the area. Those Oromos who had been part of an earlier migration to the north, furthermore, did not share the experience of being conquered. Even in core Oromo areas there were substantial cultural differences. In the eastern Hararghe region, Islam had a stronger influence. To the west, particularly in Wellega, Islam had to contend with the presence of Christian, particularly Lutheran, missionaries.[11]

To the unavoidable problems caused by the diversity of the Oromos were added the organizational weaknesses of the OLF itself. The Front never succeeded in projecting the image of a strong unified movement. There were divisions in its leadership, and different groups claimed to represent the OLF abroad. Furthermore, it did little fighting. Finally, contrary to the TPLF, which never advocated Tigrean independence, the OLF supported the creation of an independent republic of Oromia, thus raising the delicate issue of secession, which still remained unacceptable to African government. In conclusion, despite its enormous potential as the organization representing the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, the OLF remained by and large unsuccessful.

In southeastern Ethiopia, Oromo-inhabited areas shaded off into those occupied by the Somalis of the Ogaden. Here Oromo and Somali nationalism coexisted uneasily or competed. The most important group representing the Somalis was the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), which for long periods had received the support of the Mogadishu

10. Unless otherwise specified, the regions mentioned are those of the pre-1987 Ethiopia map.

11. For conflicting views on Oromo nationalism, see Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 128ff.; Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), p. 77ff.; and Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia* p. 158ff.

government. The WSLF, which had made a first appearance in the 1960s, was revived in 1976 when Somalia, seizing the opportunity offered by the turmoil in Ethiopia, prepared to go to war in the Ogaden for the second time.[12] The OLF and the WSLF represented the competing nationalisms of people broadly sharing a common territory. As a result, some parts of the Hararghe and Bale regions were claimed by both movements. It is likely that this competition in the end was an obstacle to the consolidation of any national consciousness among the population of the area. Coupled with the support that Somalia had given to the WSLF, however, it made southeastern Ethiopia a region of great instability and potential ethnic conflict.

The Afar Liberation Front (AFL) was the most peculiar of the movements in Ethiopia, straddling the divide between the feudal resistance to central power that had threatened the empire historically and the new ethnic nationalism. The AFL was led by the sultan of the Afars, a traditional ruler who in 1975 had seized the opportunity to reassert his autonomy, but had been clever enough to do so under the banner of ethnic liberation rather than of feudal reaction. As a result, the ALF survived, while other attempts by feudal landlords to reassert themselves after the overthrow of Haile Selassie failed rapidly.

The AFL was also helped by the tolerance of Mengistu and his successors. The Afar pastoralists inhabit part of the Awash valley as well as the Danakil desert, the lowland along the Red Sea coast which is part of Eritrea; the port of Assab, the most important to Ethiopia, is also in Afar territory. Afar nationalism could thus be a counterpoint to Eritrean nationalism, and, if well handled, help retain Assab and part of the Red Sea Coast in Ethiopian hands even if Eritrea became independent. As a result, when in 1987 Mengistu introduced a new plan for regional government in a last ditch attempt to stop the disintegration of the country, the Afars were offered their own region, separate from Eritrea. The same tactic was used by the new government, which in 1991 created an even larger Afar region, which appeared deliberately designed to encourage the Afars to lay claim to the Danakil desert and Assab.[13]

While the OLF, the WSLF and the ALF constituted a disrupting element in the country, it was the growth of the TPLF that tilted the scales, turning a regional insurrection into a force that eventually overthrew the regime. The origins of the TPLF are found in the Ethiopian

12. On the war, see Marina Ottaway, *Soviet and American Influence on the Horn of Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1982), chap. 6.

13. On the 1987 regions, see Edmond Keller, "Constitutionalism and the National Question: The Case of Eritrea," in Ottaway, ed. *The Political Economy of Ethiopia*, pp. 95–113. On the new 1991 map, see *Africa Confidential* 32.22 (November 8, 1991):7.

student movement and more precisely in an organization of Tigrean university students formed at the beginning of the 1970s. In 1975, in response to both the military takeover and the attempts by Tigrean landlords to restore their authority in rural areas, the student organization became the TPLF, and tried to launch an armed insurrection. At the time, the TPLF was just one of the many small groups that were taking to the mountains without experience, training or money.[14]

But while other organizations languished, the TPLF thrived. The reasons for their success are complex. Gebru Tereke, in a comparative study of the movements in Tigray and Bale, attributed the greater success of the TPLF to the support it received from the EPLF, to its ability to draw on a fairly well-defined national consciousness provided by Tigrean history, to deteriorating economic conditions in a region chronically affected by famine, and finally to the organizational ability of the leadership. By 1988 the TPLF was estimated to have 10,000 men under arms.[15]

While the theme of Tigrean nationalism was crucial to its success, the TPLF also had another identity as a Marxist-Leninist movement, a characteristic it shared with all organizations whose leaders had become politicized in the student movement in the late 1960s. Paradoxically, during the 1980s, when many organizations, including the EPLF, were beginning to tone down their Marxist rhetoric, the TPLF moved in the opposite direction. In 1985, it formalized the ideological commitment of its leadership by launching within the broader front a smaller, more ideologically committed Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray. In protest against the change sweeping through the socialist world, the League was "pro-Albanian," that is, it rejected the reforms taking place in the USSR and China.

Probably more important in the long run was what could be called the imperialist tendency of the TPLF. It redefined the borders of Tigray beyond what history justified, claiming a region extending all the way to the Sudanese border to the west. In 1988 the TPLF unexpectedly emerged as a military force to be reckoned with. In April Ethiopia suffered a major defeat at Afabet in Eritrea, after an officers' mutiny, followed by purges, left the garrison there demoralized and leaderless. More purges followed the defeat. Finally, other officers were executed after an attempted coup d'état in May 1989, leaving the Ethiopian military shattered and unwilling to fight.

The TPLF was strong enough to take advantage of the situation. While the EPLF concentrated on the liberation of Eritrea, the Tigrean

14. On the history of the TPLF, see Gebru Tereke, "Continuity and Discontinuity", p. 139ff.; and Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, p. 248ff.

15. Gebru Tereke, "Continuity and Discontinuity," especially p. 147ff.

movement pushed south. Going from victory to victory, by the end of 1989 it controlled Tigray, including the towns, and it was beginning to move into non-Tigrean areas. This prompted the TPLF to organize in the new areas a new political organization, the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (EPDM), so as to avoid suspicions of Tigrean imperialism. The two then joined to become the core of the multi-ethnic Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In reality, the EPRDF was not a separate organization, but an extension of the TPLF, although non-Tigreans were included. Meles Zenawi headed both organizations, as well as the Marxist-Leninist League.[16]

It was the EPRDF that entered Addis Ababa in May 1991. Mengistu had already fled to Zimbabwe. At a hastily arranged meeting in London, representatives of the Ethiopian government, the EPRDF, the EPLF, the OLF, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen agreed that the EPRDF should move into the capital to prevent anarchy, since the government admitted that it could not control the situation.[17]

The London meeting had agreed that a second conference should be held in the near future to discuss the future of Ethiopia. Held in Addis Ababa in July 1991, the conference was attended by 87 delegates of mostly ethnic based organizations. The EPLF was only present as observer, having declined to become involved in the internal affairs of Ethiopia, of which Eritrea did not consider itself part. The EPRDF had 32 delegates and thus dominated the conference. The OLF, with 12 delegates, also had a substantial presence. The remaining delegates represented some twenty organizations, including the ALF and the WSLF, but also many virtually unknown groups. The conference reached two major decisions. First, it acknowledged the de facto autonomy of Eritrea and agreed in principle to the holding of a UN-supervised referendum on independence after a two-year period; the EPLF in turn agreed to give Ethiopia free access to the Red Sea through the port of Assab. Second, it decided on a two-year transition within Ethiopia itself, during which time a new constitution would be prepared, leading to a general election at the end of the period. In the interim, Ethiopia would be governed by a multi-ethnic cabinet, controlled by the EPRDF, and by an 87-member Council of Representatives, based on ethnic representation and serving as a parliament.

By early 1992, the first outlines of the EPRDF plan for Ethiopia had emerged. Two elements were worth noting: the decision not only to

16. On the various movements, see *Africa Confidential* 32.11 (May 31, 1991).

17. See Terence Lyons, "The Transition in Ethiopia," *CSIS Africa Notes* 127 (August 27, 1991); and *Africa Confidential* 32.11 (May 31, 1991).

recognize the importance of ethnicity but to make it the basis of the new institutions; and the degree to which ethnicity was a variable open to manipulation by the EPRDF.

The new system was going to be built from the bottom up. It would start with elections for local councils and regional assemblies, to be held in the first half of 1992. Representatives of the regional assemblies and members of the Council of Representatives would then draw up a constitution. Since both regions and Council were organized along ethnic lines, it was a foregone conclusion that the constitution would also create ethnic institutions.

As a first step toward the holding of elections, in October 1991 the government presented a new map of the ethnic regions, to supersede the one drawn by the Mengistu regime in 1987. The political choices made by the government in drawing up the map were clear. Tigray was enlarged, extending to the Sudanese border and above all including the rich agricultural area of Setit-Humera. The Afars were also given a large region, including land claimed by the Somali Issas in the Awash Valleyand, most importantly the entire escarpment along the Danakil desert. This was an open invitation to claim that territory from Eritrea. The Amhara region was limited to the smallest possible area, both by giving an area north of Addis Ababa to the Oromo region and by setting up a surprisingly large Beni Shangul region along the Sudanese border. The map thus revealed a considerable degree of manipulation of ethnicity for political purposes.[18]

Another form of manipulation of ethnicity has been the promotion by the EPRDF of a People's Democratic Organization (PDO) in each region. For example, an Oromo People's Democratic Organization would present candidates for elections in its region, competing against the OLF, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia and other Oromo organizations. Promoted by the EPRDF, the PDOs are bound to be extensions of that movement, thus representing an attempt by the ruling group to control the regions through its own ethnic based organizations. Conflicts between autonomous organizations and those promoted from the center appear to be very likely in the long run.

The degree to which ethnicity is open to manipulation by the government or any other group raises the issue whether a system based on ethnic representation can ever be stable. Ethnic differences can no longer be ignored in Ethiopia—the emperor's and Mengistu's attempt to impose unity only led to an escalation of conflict. But it is already clear that the new system is riddled with pitfalls as well, inviting maneuvering on all sides and the emergence of an ever increasing number of conflicting groups.

18. *Africa Confidential* 32.22 (November 8, 1991).

Somalia

The problem of ethnicity in Somalia was quite different. It was also by far the most troublesome. While in Ethiopia there were reasons to doubt that either the approach of the EPLF or that of the EPRDF would work in the long run, in Somalia the situation was already out of control and seemingly hopeless. Paradoxically, Somalia was supposed to be the most homogeneous country in Africa, with one ethnic group, one language and one religion. It was, a study argued, a nation in search of a state.[19]

But the population is deeply divided into clans and sub-clans, and this reality has dominated the country's politics under all the political systems it has experienced. During the first nine years of independence, under formally democratic institutions, clans competed with each other as political parties—over seventy of them existed at one point, in a country of about three million people. After the 1969 military coup d'état, Mohammed Siad Barre turned to the Soviet Union in order to build up his army. With weapons and military advisors came political advisors, and with them an experiment in Marxism-Leninism that appeared to replace the rule of the party and the military with the influence of the clans. But the Somali defeat in the Ogaden war of 1977–78 weakened the army, while the 1977 expulsion of the Soviets, guilty of opposing the war and of seeking good relations with Ethiopia, spelled the end of the party. Siad Barre managed to stay in power for another decade, relying increasingly on the support of clan members.

The disintegration started in 1988, when the Somali National Movement (SNM), an organization dominated by the northern Issaq clan, was forced out of its safe bases in Ethiopia following an attempt at improving relations between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa. Entering the northern part of Somalia, the SNM seized Hargheisa. Forced to abandon the city by the bombs of the Somali air force, the movement nevertheless remained in control of much of the northern area. Refugees streamed across the border into Ethiopia.

Northern Somalia had always been considered particularly vulnerable to the appeal of a separatist movement. A former British territory hastily joined to Italian Somalia just before independence, it had always been poorly integrated with the rest of the country. But the problem did not stop there. Siad Barre, in power for twenty years, was beginning to lose his grip on the political situation. His power base was increasingly narrow, with family and clan providing the main props to his faltering

19. David D. Laitin and Said S. Samatar, *Somalia: A Nation in Search of A State* (London: Gower, 1987).

regime. The final blow was a serious car accident, which almost cost him his life and left him seriously weakened. Opposition movements, all of them clan based, sprung up or became stronger all over the country.

In January 1991 Mohammed Siad Barre was overthrown, with the United Somali Congress (USC) playing a major part in his ouster. A USC leader, Ali Mahdi Mohammed, became the interim president. Then the real problems started. The USC, representing the large Hawiye clan, split, and within a few months the leader of the opposing faction, General Mohammed Farah Aydeed, challenged Ali Mahdi Mohammed for the presidency. The fight between these two factions devastated Mogadishu for months, and was still raging at the time of this writing. The Somali National Movement took the same decision as the EPLF, declaring the north independent and keeping aloof from attempts to find an agreement among the different movements. In the southern part of the country, a number of conflicting movements, but above all the local leaders and warlords, ran their own bailiwicks.

A reconciliation conference held in Djibouti in July 1991 saw delegations from Kenya, Uganda and Djibouti itself attempting to mediate among six Somali movements, with another sixteen countries and six international organizations sending observers. The movements agreed to a cease-fire, but with little effect on the ground, where warlords and small armed groups made their own decisions irrespective of the decisions reached by the more formal movements. Subsequent attempts at mediation—by the Arab League, the OAU, Ethiopia, Djibouti, the EPLF—were all to no avail. The fighting continued unabated. Somalia no longer had a government. It only remained a state by a fiction of the international system.[20]

Conclusions

Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia represented three different types of nationalism in Africa. Eritrea was dominated by the country nationalism of the independence struggle, Ethiopia by ethnic nationalism, and Somalia by micronationalism. While the issue of costs and benefits of country versus ethnic nationalism was open to debate, there was no doubt that an outcome like Somalia's entailed only costs, with no benefits to counterbalance them. The question was whether a progression from country to ethnic nationalism, and from that to micronationalism, was inevitable.

20. See *Africa Confidential* 32.3 (February 8, 1991), 32.16 (August 9, 1991), and 33.3 (February 7, 1992).

The possibility certainly existed. Like all independent African countries, Eritrea was certain to start experiencing ethnic tensions as soon as the euphoria of independence was over. With its ethnic and religious diversity, in a region torn by ethnic conflict, it was unlikely to escape. The deliberate fostering of ethnic consciousness by the new Ethiopian government would not help Eritrea forge a unified national identity, particularly since many highland Eritreans shared religion, language and culture with Ethiopia's Tigreans. Neither would the strong Islamic fundamentalist currents dominating northern Sudan, which could easily spread across the border into Eritrea. But the EPLF insisted that these were secondary problems, deviations from the correct model of a unified country.

After fifteen years of war, Ethiopia had given up on country nationalism and accepted the reality of ethnic divisions. But to make the system workable, ethnicity had to be manipulated. Only a limited number of groups could be given official recognition, and regional boundaries were inevitably the result of political decisions. The distribution of the population over the territory has not allowed the formation of genuinely homogeneous regions, at least not without gerrymandering and fragmentation. All regions contain minorities which could easily become resentful of the identity that the government has imposed on them. Furthermore, the entire system could be manipulated to suit the government's goals. Far from eliminating ethnic controversy, the system risks increasing it, leading to an infinite regression of ethnic claims and ultimately to a Somali-type scenario.

The conclusion is pessimistic but not unwarranted. To be sure, African countries did experience ethnic strife before without disintegrating. After the Biafran crisis, Nigeria handled the problem of ethnicity fairly successfully, for example. But Africa in the 1990s is exposed to the influences of a very different international context. In the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, nationalism has exploded and become a dominant issue. Western countries, after greeting with enthusiasm the nationalism of the Baltic states because it weakened the Soviet Union, are worried by the unchecked spreading of the phenomenon, but also increasingly resigned to its inevitability.

Events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe also created a precedent. If the countries emerging from the disintegration of the Soviet Union received international recognition, Eritrea could not be denied the same, and in the long run neither could the new ethnic states. Finally, Eastern Europe has given ethnicity a much higher degree of respectability. In Africa, ethnic claims had been dismissed as tribalism. In Europe, they have become nationalism. The legitimating potential of the new national states of Europe has not been lost on those African leaders who have

chosen to play the ethnic card. A curious and telling example was a visit, in late 1991, to Bophuthatswana, one of South Africa's "independent" homelands and the one most resistant to reincorporation, by official delegations from Lithuania, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Nothing concrete could come out of such visit, but the symbolism was unmistakable.

The Horn has some unique characteristics that have favored the growth of ethnic nationalism. Ethiopia's imperial past, the formation of Somalia from the merger of the colonies of two European powers, the different influences to which Eritrea was exposed after it was occupied by Italy: all explain why nationalism has become a particularly burning issue in the Horn. But this does not mean that it could not spread to other African countries. Nationalism in the Baltic states also was originally explained by their unique history, but it did not stop there.

Ethnic nationalism has already become an issue in other African countries, although the reasons were different in each. One of those countries is South Africa. The white government is moving away from apartheid, but a new political system based on ethnicity is being proposed by a combination of conservative whites and black homeland leaders. Apartheid in its grand Verwoerdian interpretation has been an attempt to divide the country into ethnically homogeneous regions that eventually would become independent states. The attempt to foster ethnic nationalism appears to have failed. The homelands are small, fragmented and barren, and people were relocated there against their will, with no jobs, housing, or land. There is nothing in this system with which anybody would want to identify. But as the government admitted defeat and started to negotiate a new system, the homelands have found their supporters. What was wrong with the policy, argued many homeland leaders, is not the concept of ethnic autonomy, but the fact that the black nations were not given enough land and resources. The solution to apartheid is not a unitary state, unworkable in such a heterogeneous society, but the consolidation of the homelands into larger, contiguous units with a potential for economic development—in other words, something akin to Ethiopia's ethnic regions.

Ethnic nationalism could easily spread. The growing movement toward democracy has created fertile ground for a heightening of ethnic feelings, as it has done in Eastern Europe. Many African political parties in the past had an ethnic basis—this was indeed one of the arguments used by the ruling elite to justify the imposition of single-party systems. Allegiance to the state was weak in most countries. Once the overriding control of an authoritarian government was removed, there were good chances that ethnic separatism rather than political pluralism would blossom. The largest, most diverse and unwieldy countries, Zaire for instance, were strong candidates for such a development. But they were

not the only ones. In Mozambique, for example, the decision to allow the formation of political parties in late 1990 immediately put the issue of ethnicity on the political agenda, as the right to citizenship of people of Portuguese, Goan or mixed descent was questioned by new parties and even within Frelimo.

The three nationalisms of the Horn, thus, could be seen as models of the evolution of nationalism in Africa. Eritrea represented yesterday's post-independence country nationalism. Ethiopia is today's trend toward ethnic nationalism, a phenomenon affecting parts of Europe as well as Africa. The danger, unfortunately, is that Somalia may represent tomorrow's outcome.