

## ETHNIC PARTIES AND STATE CONTINUITY IN ETHIOPIA: A CASE ON OROMO LIBERATION FRONT (OLF) AND NATIONAL MOVEMENT OF AMHARA (NaMa)

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this article was to demonstrate the position of OLF and NaMA regarding the Ethiopian state continuity and national issues.

**Methods:** Interview, observation, and focus group discussion were employed beside to document and manifesto analysis. The research is qualitative and used comparative case study design. The analysis technique was thematic.

**Results:** The finding of this study reveals OLF as secessionist, consider emperor Menelik II as a black colonizer and other Ethiopian Emperors as assimilationist. It has zero value for Abyssinian values and legacies. Its participation in destructing economic sectors, sowing ethnic hatred, killing innocents, treason against the state, and unwillingness to demilitarize till today demonstrates it as a threat for national unity. Conversely, NaMA praise the works of previous Ethiopian rulers and claim Addis Ababa as the city of All Ethiopians. Unlike OLF that was formed on the basis of colonial thesis, NaMA was formed on the basis of national oppression thesis. It strongly supports unity and state continuity.

**Conclusion:** A discussion platform among political parties for national consensus and unity has to be extensively done. Such unresolved issues will going to be a threat for state continuity. Major revisions on constitution and other legal frameworks should be adopted.

**Keywords:** Amhara, NaMA, National unity, OLF, Oromo.

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### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the study

Politicization of ethnicity is the pushing factor for most of the troubles happened in the world including the widespread movement of ethno-nationalist movements in Europe, Yugoslavian genocide and race-based conflicts in USA around 1960's and 1970's (Lentz, 1995). In states like Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Fiji, ethnic groups realized their plan of forming ethnic parties to advance the interest of their group only (Hashmi and Majeed, 2015).

Party politics has very recent history in Ethiopia. Both the Imperial and *Derg* governments banned any legal political parties in the country (Teshome, 1981). During the 1960's, various student movements at home and abroad raised many questions, relating to land reform and nationalities right. Initially the Ethiopian student movement had a pan- Ethiopian view (Teshome, 1981). However, the rebellion in Bale and the Eritrean resistance as well as student's inclination toward Marxist - Leninist idea reshaped them to focus on nationalities question (Baken, 2009). The offspring parties of students, such as *MEISON* and *EPRP*, accepted the right of self-determination up to secession as their hallmark. They supported ethno-nationalist groups in advance by detaching themselves from a usually advocated idea of Pan- Ethiopianism.

The state formation process in Ethiopia resulted for the creation of two polarized viewpoints. That is, Pan-Ethiopianist versus Ethno-nationalist. The former perceived the expansion of emperor Menelik II in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a tool to form one Ethiopia as a nation state. On the other hand, ethno-nationalist forces such as the Oromo Liberation Front and Ogaden National Liberation Fronts claims that the Abyssinian rulers through their expansionist policy colonized vast territories by imposing their own culture and religion on colonies (Assefa, 2010). This polarized narration instigated many dis-satisfied ethnic groups to organize themselves in their line of ethnicity and began movements for the independence and freedom of their own ethnic group (Alem, 2003; Aalen, 2006; Teshome, 1981).

In the 1960's many ethnic based rebel groups such as Eritrean Liberation Front, Ethiopian National Liberation Front, which was an Oromo based movement, and Somali Abo Liberation front were supported by Islamic and socialist states both ideally and financially to weaken the Ethiopian central government (Wondwosen, 2009).

Immediately, following the downfall of H/Selassie's regime, the *Derg* government tried to give recognition for diverse nationalities by establishing an "Institute for the study of Ethiopian nationalities" and by permitting their culture and language to be practiced with some limitations. Though the government fully accepted the Marxist-Leninist ideology of self-determination of all ethnic groups and nationalities, practically it was highly centralized. It had a rigid policy towards Ethiopian national unity. Its popular slogan was Ethiopia first or *Ethiopia Tkidem* in Amharic (Tuso, 1997). It established its own party, Workers Party of Ethiopia, by outlawing all kinds of political parties be it ethnic, non-ethnic or multi ethnic (Baken, 2009). This policy forced the government to stay in a very protracted war with ethnic based insurgent groups like Tigray People Liberation Front, Oromo Liberation Front, Eritrean Liberation Front, Western Somalia Liberation Front, Afar Liberation Front, Islamic Oromo Liberation Front and Ogaden National Liberation Front (Wood, 1983). Rather than eliminating and stopping such groups, the government's repressive and massive attack promoted them to be strong and invincible to achieve their goal (Alemante, 1992; Alem, 2003).

In 1992, *EPRDF* replaced the *Derg* government through military power. Ethnic based political groups dominated the transitional period national conference. This amplifies *EPRDF*'s conception to address and incorporate the basic questions of ethnic groups and promoting the unity of Ethiopia (Baken, 2009). It drew itself as the guardian of ethnic groups (Keller, 1995). Since 1991 the *EPRDF* regime through its ethnic federalism, legally formalized the nationalities quest for self-determination up to secession.

The nature of EPRDF as a coalition of ethnic based political parties promoted the mushrooming of ethno-nationalist parties while it discouraged pan-Ethiopianist parties (Wondwosen, 2009). Thus, ethnic based political parties outnumbered that of Pan-Ethiopianist parties. The FDRE constitution clearly stated its state building strategy on two basic pillars: Protecting the right of each ethnic group and promoting the unity of Ethiopia (Baken, 2009). Oromo Liberation Front and National Movement of Amhara are among ethnic based political parties that were formed in different periods to maintain the interest of Oromo and Amhara people's, respectively.

### Statement of the problem and objectives

The post 1991 Ethiopia is characterized by the following two contradictory political forces. The first group strongly seeks the unity of Ethiopia by giving second place for the issue of ethnicity, culture and linguistic identities (Zeryehun, 2012). The second group, on the other hand, seeks ethnicity as a primary means to achieve their own political interest. It uses the FDRE constitution as a legal instrument to undermine Ethiopian sovereignty.

The EPRDF government strongly supports the mobilization of ethnic groups on the basis of their culture and language as a panacea to address their quest (Vaughan 2003:169-170 cited in African Report 2009). The formation of ethnic parties empowered many ethnic groups to have proper representation at regional and national level. It was on the basis of this assumption that OLF and NaMA political parties were established. Coinciding with giving due concern for their ethnic group, they promised to create a common democratic Ethiopia that permit every nationality to be a genuine beneficiary of the state resource and active participant of political power (OLF political program, 2012, NaMA political program, 2019, Addis Standard, 2018, Herald, 2019). However, for the one who scrutinized their policy, they have a mutually exclusive program. Indeed, the main objective of this article is to scrutinize the origin, political program and practice of OLF and NaMA and their implication on state continuity.

### Conceptual framework

Politicization of ethnicity is the technique of employing ethnicity for political purpose (Weber, 2009). It is globally abundant in states such as Israel, Nigeria, Algeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, and India.

Ethnic parties are political associations that are supported by a particular ethnic group alone. It is political organization that mobilize voters by identifying the key interests of a particular ethnic group (Chandra, 2005). Its name should also reflect the legal and historical attachment of the party with the group it wishes to represent.

### METHODS

In this article, the researcher used qualitative case study design. Qualitative research aims at understanding the opinion and view of respondents by employing focus group discussion or interview (Dawson, 2007). Thus, the researcher's intention was to understand the insights of the respondents concerning the implications of OLF and NaMA on state continuity. Those two political parties were selected because they have very great influence and supporter than other ethnic parties in their respective region. The strategy for this case study was comparative. Comparative study is a renowned research strategy to compare two or more countries by setting a criterion; always research questions (Matthews and Ross, 2010). All the questions raised for both parties are similar in content. Since the case was intrinsic, the researcher had no intention to generalize the findings of the two ethnic based parties to the rest of ethnic based parties running in the state.

I used various documents, party's program, party's social media pages, stored documents, magazines, meeting reports, demonstrations organized by parties, various TV interviews with party leaders and press conferences. Beside to this, I employed interview, focus group discussion, and observation to assess the perception of its members

about their country, the mechanisms to reach consensus on national matters. Making interview and focus group discussion with key informants was continued until the researcher gets sufficient data. The researcher used purposive and event non-probable sampling techniques because it helps to meet target respondents easily.

The researcher purposefully selected party leaders, members of both political parties, scholars of political science in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar universities, journalists, nationalist party leaders and members of the various communities. Thus, most of the interviews including with both party leaders were held at Addis Ababa. I had also a discussion with Walta and EBC journalists. Event sampling involves collecting of data from participants of a particular event or conferences. I attended the public conferences of both parties to observe the opinion of leaders and members toward national unity.

The researcher coherently described basic outcomes through thematic and discourse analysis. In thematic analysis, a set of groups are identified by standing from the response of participants (Dowson, 2007). The researcher categorized the response of all key informants into themes to present the data without fragmentation. According to Matthews and Ross, "Discourse analysis can be applied to conversations, letters, emails, television programs, documents, archives, and many other things" (2010:391). The researcher fundamentally used various television interviews with the leaders of parties, public conference speeches, and press conferences. By doing so, the available data were interpreted properly to address the basic research questions and objectives.

### RESULTS

#### The origin of Oromo liberation front

The formation of OLF is not a direct process; rather, it was gradual that got its base in civic associations. The freedom to form self-help civic associations during emperor H/Selassie regime paved the way for the establishment of Jibat and Macha, Metta Kobii, and Tulama Shawa Oromo based self-help associations (RRT Research Response, 2009). Those independent organizations formed a coalition in a new name called Mecha -Tulama association. Later on, when the imperial government arrested its members and abolished the association in 1967, its prisoned members recommended the need for the establishment of Oromo based political party. Its formation of OLF coincided with the 1974 popular revolution that deposed the emperor from power (K17<sup>1</sup>, Addis Ababa University, March 10, 2019). Factors like the 5 year Italian occupation that preached the uniqueness of the Oromo people (Vaughan, 2003), Oromo students movement with the slogan of "land to the natives," the German missionary activities in the western Ethiopia, the European colonial adventures in the area, the Somali Abo movement, the support from Somali and the Ethiopian students' movement and through it the intervention of socialist countries (Wondwossen, 2009) played a significant role for the establishment of the party. It was formed on the basis of colonial thesis.

#### The origin of national movement of Amhara

While major ethnic groups rely with their reserve plan, the Amhara ethnic group had no alternative plan other than Ethiopia. For instance, the Oromo politicians advocate the Oromo nationalism through enormous Oromo based political parties and medias since long period ago. In similar case, the Tigreans controlled key economic and political outlets to maintain the interest of their ethnic group through institutional way. Not only this, the interest of the Somali people has been represented and articulated by the ONLF.

Members of the Amhara ethnic group are well known in strongly sticking of themselves with Ethiopian nationalism. They had a very little space for ethnic nationalism. The Amhara people, both peasant and educated, considered organization along ethnicity as being primitive and

<sup>1</sup> Political science scholar from Addis Ababa University

backward (Wondwossen, 2009). For instance, the AAPO<sup>2</sup> was changed into All Ethiopian Unity Party as a response for globalization and its assessment about the evil effect of ethnicity for national unity. Many Amhara elites were not ready to participate and support the All Amhara People Organization, the first Amhara based political party established in 1992 but became ineffective due to the government's harsh measurement. As time passes and the government's negative attitude toward the Amhara ethnic group intensified, people moved and decide to avert the situation through institutional way (Mastewal, 2016). One mechanism designed by its elites was forming National Movement of Amhara. NaMA introduced a new concept in the political dynamics of Ethiopia because it was formed within a society that worships strong Ethiopian identity.

### OLF and NaMA in comparative perspective

There is no consensus regarding common national figures such as National Flag, Constitution, National hero, Capital city, and history of the state. The OLF has reiterate Addis Ababa as the land of the Oromo. On the contrary, NaMA claims the capital city as the land of all Ethiopians though historically it was built on the Amhara land called Berera<sup>3</sup> during 16<sup>th</sup> century. It propose the city to be autonomous and administered by its representative as it is the head of enormous national, regional, and international organizations.

Members of OLF have irreconcilable complain on the previous kings of Ethiopia. Their dissent emanated from the victim and colonial - thesis narration of the party about the Oromo people by northern settlers. For OLF, Emperor Haile Selassie II was an assimilator ruler who strived to load the Amharization policy on the Oromo people. The interest of OLF is to make its logo the flag of Ethiopia though it understands to deal with other ethnic groups. As the researcher assured in his observation, the OLF logo is highly acceptable in many parts of Oromia. Beside to this, the party appreciate many of the provisions stated in the FDRE constitution while it denounce the inclusion of few articles. It seeks the need to amend provisions concerning the power sharing between levels of government and the issue of Addis Ababa. The OLF needs federal structure that provides regional states with huge power to bargain with the federal government. Beside to this, The OLF argues the seat of Addis Ababa representatives to be in Chaffee Oromia, state council of Oromia regional state, not in House of People Representatives.

As the researcher confirmed in his observation, the previous kings of Ethiopia who successfully defended the sovereignty of the state from invaders have a paramount position in NaMA. The move of emperor Menelik II toward the South in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is taken as the sacrifice for modern state formation. The Amharization policy of Emperor Haile Selassie II is considered by NaMA as part of the nation building process happened everywhere in Europe. The civil flag having green, yellow and red colors is preferable among majority of NaMA leaders, members and supporters. For instance, members of NaMA were holding the civil flag during special conferences, celebrations and anniversaries. The logo and the office of NaMA are decorated with the civil flag<sup>4</sup>. The party considers the constitution as a shackle to undermine the Amhara people in the coverage of rule of law. The government through its apparatus demoted the dignity of the Amhara people. Beside to this, the Amhara people are still forced to be governed by illegal documents ratified without the consultation of genuine Amhara representatives. As a result, NaMA recommends the introduction of new or amended constitution that does not create antipathy between the Amhara and other ethnic groups as mandatory.

### The practice of OLF and NaMA and its implication on state continuity

Many people argue on the incorporation of article 39, that permit secession through legal framework, as a motivation for ethno-

nationalist forces to advocate independence (Abbink, 2012). Allowing the right to secede for more than 80 ethnic groups is an expression of deliberate denouncing of national unity (Dereje, 2018). On the other hand, there are scholars who consider the inclusion of article 39 as a means to accommodate the interest of diverse political groups of the then. Despite its availability in the legal document of the state, the government has no room to compromise on secession clause in defacto (McCracken, 2004). The post 1991 period that deem decentralized respond any claim for independence in very harsh way.

The OLF is engaging in Ethiopian politics by holding two extreme and incompatible agendas. These are peaceful coexistence and secession. Its position is either to re construct Ethiopia shaped by the legacy of Oromo culture or deconstructing it to form independent Oromo state. It inculcated large number of the Oromo people with siege mentality attitude. This made the Oromo people to consider other ethnic groups as its existential enemy. It created a sense of isolation in the minds of the Oromo people. It is against a well-integrated social development, which is normal in every society. The OLF killed innocents who have no political participation at all (Abbink, 2012). Its armed strategy is responsible for aggravating the violence scale of the organization in many areas. Many incidents and catastrophes on civilians recorded in Oromia regional state, where OLF has majority support and recruit its soldiers. The party is responsible for coordinating the displacement of one million Gedeo nationals from Gujji and the eviction of around 90,000 Oromos from Benishangul Gumuz regional state. Thousands of Amharic speakers and Christians were killed and houses turned into ashes in Merti, Gegu and Abomsa provinces, all in Arbagugu by OLF members and representatives (Ethiopian Information Service Network, 1991).

Members of OLF were collaborators of mob justice that was committed against the Wolayita national in Shashemane. The news of Ethiopian observer (January 14, 2019) confirmed the participation of the OLF in robbing 17 economic centers including the Commercial bank of Ethiopia, Awash Bank, United Bank and Oromia Union Banks in West and Qellem Wollega zones. The report, by citing Oromia state officials, confirmed the crime as committed by OLF. Around 1.4 million ETB was stolen from the Ethiopian people by this political organization. All such illegal activities are against the prosperity of the Ethiopian people. Even after its name was erased from terrorist blacklist, it fought with government forces in Wollega zone through weapon. From the legal perspective, political parties registration proclamation no.46/1993 prohibit the recognition and the legal entity of any political party that try to employ armed strategy. Documents are also available about the participation of the OLF in assisting the Eritrean government during the 1998-2000 Ethio -Eritrean war. Helping the Eritrean government to control the borderlands of Ethiopia has further implication beyond wishing to topple down the incumbent government. All such evidences have testified how OLF is a threat to state continuity and peaceful coexistence.

On the other hand, the engagement of NaMA in Ethiopian politics brought a mixed effect on national unity. It has rigid position toward the unity of the state. As clearly stated in its program, the party committed itself to be the guardian of Ethiopian unity. It praises the unreserved effort of forefathers that defend the state from external enemy. For instance, the researcher observed the warm celebration of the Adwa victory through the instigation of NaMA in Addis Ababa and other towns of Amhara. Its office is also painted with the images previous Ethiopia rulers like Emperor Tewodros II, Menelik II, Haile Selassie I, Dejazmach Belay Zeleke, Ras Micheal, Empress Taytu, Empress Zewditu and other Amhara martyred. This party is formed to balance the influence of extreme ethno- nationalist groups. Other ethno-nationalist groups started their struggle with a dream to form independent republic as explicitly stated on the political program of OLF, ONLF, TPLF, and EPLF. However, the way NaMA was formed is unique because its vision is advocating the free movement of individuals irrespective of their ethnic background. Its strategy has

2 All Amhara People's Organization was the first Amhara based party founded by professor Asrat Woldeyes

3 Ancient city where today's Addis Ababa is built on

4 The previous green, yellow and red flag of Ethiopia

no difference with parties that advocate civic nationalism. The only difference is that the former gives priority for the Amhara people and belongs all the manifestations of Ethiopian identity as the core values of Amhara while the latter directly advocate very strong Ethiopian nationalism. NaMA is a liberal ethno-nationalist party that prioritizes individual freedom. It advocates the free movement of people from place to place without any ethnic fence. Through social Medias, it condemned the massive human rights violation committed against the Gedeo people. This makes NaMA the first ethnic based party that stands for the interest of other ethnic groups. Beside to this, its alternative national policies, such as economic and legal, disproved the already accepted idea of confining ethnic based parties to the extent of their locality alone.

Despite the above contributions, NaMA created a temporary shock in the eyes of other ethnic groups. The suspicion stems as the party started to possess the perceived core values and identities of Ethiopia as the identity of Amhara people only. For instance, previously the green, yellow and red flag, Emperors, victories, historical heritages, the Amharic letter and language altogether were perceived as common manifestations of all Ethiopians. This is happened due to the high Amhara cultural reflection in the Ethiopian identity. As NaMA began articulating such cultural manifestations as the identity of Amhara people others felt a sense of defection and isolation. Emotion laden speeches emanated from over confidence on Ethiopian state hood erodes the sense of unity as it serves to diminish the role of other ethnic groups in the state making process. Beside to this, its program stipulates the Amharic language to serve as both the official language of the federal government and national language of the state. This policy could not be effective in a state where many ethnic groups compete for hegemony and supremacy.

## DISCUSSION

There is a previous understanding of ethnic parties as locally bounded. Many ethnic groups are claiming to achieve their interest at the expense of other ethnic groups. Many local politicians and leaders are promoting their members to instigate a violence on other competing groups (African Report, 2009). It is clear that such kind of violent conflict strongly erodes the unity of various nationalities to live in a brotherhood sense. According to Teklu (n.d: 2-3), practicing politics on the basis of ethnicity has the following drawbacks. First, it weakens ethnic based parties capacity to look national matters beyond their own locality. Second, it will limit their existence physically and psychologically. They always seven strive to campaign and win only on their particular region. Third, the existence of many ethnic based parties in a particular region may invite clashes among themselves. This, in turn, reduces people's confidence on them and may led to confusion. Fourth, it strongly denounce political parties role to discuss on common national issues. They seek and devote their energy to solve the affairs of their own ethnic group at primary level. This attitude strongly erodes future cooperation with other ethnic groups under the umbrella of one Ethiopia. While this understanding is real for OLF, it does not work for NaMA. NaMA's agenda goes beyond achieving freedom for the Amhara nationals. Rather it participated in enacting alternative political, economic and legal instruments that will advance the life all Ethiopians.

## CONCLUSION

Many people seek to present all ethnic parties on one sack. They present NaMA as equivalent with secessionist parties. However, the finding of this research discloses the disparity between NaMA and other ethnic parties like OLF. There is irreconcilable divergent interest between OLF and NaMA regarding the program and the practice they advocate about Ethiopia. OLF adopted secession as its political destination in its first meeting. The party claims the quest of the Oromo people as tantamount with the EPLF's struggle for independence. Emperor Menelik II and his riflemen are portrayed by the party as

a black colonizer inside Africa. The emperor's march toward south is presented in comparison with the white colonizers participated in Berlin conference around 1884. All the efforts of the previous Abyssinian rulers are interpreted by the party as a move to undermine and assimilate the Oromo people in to the yoke of Amharaization policy. OLF has no value for the Abyssinian legacies like the flag and different victories. Furthermore, the party demands all ethnic groups to recognize Addis Ababa as the land Oromo. It is struggling to make Addis Ababa to be accountable for Oromia regional state including the seat of its council in Chaffee Oromia, a state council in Oromia regional state. Its strategy to control political power is weapon. It is against the core values and principles of democracy.

On the other hand, NaMA brought a mixed effect on national unity. It played a vital role to deter the influence of secessionist forces. Its alternative policies have paramount significant for the development and continuity of the state. However, its agenda to perceive the core values and identities of Ethiopia as the manifestation of the Amhara created a sense of inferiority on others.

The government should demilitarize all political parties. Otherwise, armed groups will continue to create problems on civilians and state continuity. A discussion platform among political parties for national consensus and unity has to be extensively done. Such unresolved issues will going to be a threat for state continuity. Major revisions on constitution and other legal frameworks should be adopted.

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