

A BRIEF COMMENT ON THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY IN ERITREA:

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Note for Readers: This was originally posted on What 'Up-based Snitna Network, as a feedback to Dr. Salah Jami's intervention, concerning the issue of identity, on June 11, 2021.

Whenever the issue of identity is raised, many of us get nervous because what comes to our mind is ethnic federalism, as we see it in Ethiopia. As candidly put by Dr. Salah, identity is a reality we should neither ignore nor exaggerate. It is an objective reality we recognize now and tomorrow, and address, in a fair and just manner, at the right time. The way we address it depends on the history of the country and the relations of the different sections of the society to one another.

Accordingly, the Ethiopian solution for the identity issue was based on the history of the country, which was an imperial state, where antagonistic relations existed between the different sections of the society. In other words, there were oppressors who ruled in the name of a certain ethnic group, ensuring its supremacy in all aspects (political, economic, social, cultural, religious....etc). On the other hand, there were oppressed peoples, whose land had been grabbed, culture, history, and social values disrespected and denigrated, and forcefully ruled without any consideration for their will and history. The struggle of the oppressed Ethiopian peoples, spearheaded by the TPLF, was the result of this long history of oppression. Naturally, the Ethiopian solution was supposed to be exactly as the EPRDF had visualized: federation based on ethnicity in which all rebel groups, representing the aspirations of their own peoples, would agree.

I had been long enough in Ethiopia and lived in areas, where grievances had been expressed in the loudest and the clearest voice, to realize how different ethnic groups feel and look at the Ethiopian history. The solution cannot be correct, if it is outside the historical grievances of the peoples.

Though at implementation level there could be some irregularities, ethnic federalism in Ethiopia was a realistic solution that could be perfected with time. Nobody has the right to tell them, "It is dangerous", like Atse Isias shamefully did, surprising Ethiopians with his ignorance about the country, its history, and the psychological make-up of the peoples. That was what the peoples wanted, but the weaknesses in the implementation have to be corrected, ensuring the protection of minorities within the ethnically-based "Kelel" or regional state, and eliminating federal interference.

However, to our great relief, the Eritrean situation is totally different. No ethnic group had ruled others. No antagonistic relations had existed between different sections of the population with different ethnic, regional, or religious backgrounds. All had been ruled by the same multiple colonizers, who saw only their advantage and followed divisive policies like all colonizers. The end result was disparity or uneven socio-economic development between different sections of the population, as well as development in other spheres of life. This naturally creates grievances because some will lag behind from others in some or all spheres of life.

Here we should not forget that socio-economic development is usually uneven, but colonial policies had widened the gap. In other words, no ethnic or religious group is responsible for the creation of that gap and the resulting grievances. This is the reason why we do not have antagonistic relations among the different sections of the Eritrean society. This makes the solution different from that of Ethiopia, easier, and everlasting.

Of course, in general terms, decentralization is a solution. When the right time comes, we can discuss and agree on the best way to address it. For now, it is very critical (no other way) but focus on retrieving the state from the criminal gang (winning political power) and make it our own, delaying the discussions on how to address identity issues, while recognizing diversity and its positive nature, as one of our riches we need to be proud of.

I am sure, no fair-minded Eritrean would dispute that we should address the issue of identity in a way that strikes a balance between what is general and what is the particular (identity). If we are genuine enough, the general and the particular cannot be antagonistic to each other. They would rather be complementary.

I hope this is perfectly in line with the awesome interventions I have read above.