

MZF Dialogues



Class and Nationality in Ethiopia

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Class and National Politics

The topic I was assigned is *Class and National Politics*. This is truly a very complicated matter. It was debated for years even in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, I have no choice but to be very brief. I plan to focus on the Ethiopian context but will preface it with a brief mention of the origin of the global debate on *Class and National Politics*.

Class and National Politics were debated at length by European Marxists in the decades leading up to the outbreak of WWI. The topic becomes germane only in situations where both exploitation on the basis of class and oppression on the basis of nationhood coincide.

European Marxists of the period accorded primacy to class exploitation and the struggle that it engenders due to one reason. They considered class struggle as the universal motive force of history. On this they were unanimous. They were divided, however, on how to compatibly combat class exploitation and nation subjugation, where the two coincide. Some of them, Rosa Luxemburg prominent among them, saw national struggle as a potential distraction from class struggle. Lenin took the direct opposite stand of emphasising the importance of supporting national struggle even for the success of class struggle.

And it needs to be pointed out that this debate was being conducted in the context of advancing proletarian internationalism. The final destination of the period's revolutionary struggle was crystal clear to the participants in this debate. It was the dawning of a global just order in which neither class exploitation nor national oppression prevail. In the words of Lenin, the aim of the struggle is "not only to abolish the present division of mankind into small states and all national isolation; not only to bring the nations closer together, but to merge them" (Lenin 1970: 2)

This ultimate coalescence of the entire humanity into a single global whole would be realized only by merging "the class struggle of the workers in the oppressing nations with the class struggle of the workers in the oppressed nations" (Lenin 1970: 12). And this merger of the struggles of both types of workers can be ascertained only under the leadership of a single, highly centralized revolutionary party. In order to assure the dominance of this single revolutionary party, the aspirations of any other group had to be disparaged and repressed. Particularly, those aspiring to uphold the interests of oppressing nation were designated as "chauvinists" and subjected to severe denunciation. Similarly, those intending to prioritize the interests of the oppressed nation were called "narrow nationalists" and were equally denounced.

The revolutionary party by being armed with Marxist-Leninist ideology has the ability to uncover the single absolute truth about social and political reality. Having discovered the correct political line, it has no patience or tolerance for the stand of others. And such a political organization that advances the single, correct political line is designated as the vanguard party.

The universe of the vanguard party is supposedly populated by vicious reactionaries and virtuous revolutionaries. And the struggle between these two protagonists takes on a life or death fashion. The vanguard party, hence, should do everything possible to successfully come out of this struggle by liquidating or subordinating all its reactionary opponents by any means necessary.

The vanguard party approach to politics arrived in Ethiopia in the early 1970s with a devastating ultimate implication. Most left-leaning Ethiopian political organizations of the period aspired to emerge as the single vanguard party. But two of them ended up becoming each other's bitter rivals. And they were the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement – more commonly known as MAESON.

These two aspirants for the vanguard party status and the ruling military junta, known as the Derg, soon found themselves in a bitter triangular struggle. This triangular struggle ultimately culminated in the introduction of both the practice and phrase known as the Red Terror. The Red Terror marked a dark and tragic period in Ethiopian politics in which tens of thousands lost their life.

Despite their bitter rivalry, both EPRP and MAESON openly advocated the right to self-determination of Ethiopia's oppressed nations. The EPRP was the more vociferous in insisting that this right should stretch up to and including secession. And both of them founded surrogate liberation fronts, particularly for the Oromo. Hence, the EPRP founded the Oromo People's Liberation Front and MAESON also established the Oromo People's Liberation Movement.

One implication of the Red Terror is often overlooked. It significantly weakened the EPRP and virtually liquidated MAESON outright. This allowed the national liberation forces of the time to step into the resulting vacuum. And these national liberation fronts also subscribed to Marxist-Leninist ideology to varying degrees. And they aspired to emerge as the vanguard liberation front of their self-ascribed constituency.

And they defied subordination by the nascent rival vanguard parties in order to defend their autonomy. Three of them, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), went on to have enduring impact on Ethiopia's politics. In the meantime, they resorted to several political manoeuvres in order to fend off subordination by the rival Ethiopia-wide ML parties. The EPLF and OLF designated their cases as a colonial question to achieve this purpose. And the leaders of the TPLF took the unusual stand of stipulating that the national question could have primacy over class struggle in certain circumstances.

These three liberation fronts were collectively emerging as the most powerful group fighting against the Derg regime by the mid-1980s. In particular, the TPLF's military muscle was outgrowing the Front's initial agenda of realizing the self-determination of Tigrean society. Thereafter, TPLF leaders started putting in place the military preparations and ideological justifications for taking over, reconfiguring and ruling Ethiopia. Claiming that the TPLF had always been led by a Marxist-Leninist core, they publicized the existence of the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT). Thereafter, their aspiration of transforming the TPLF into an Ethiopia-wide ML vanguard party became the subject of speculation by outsiders.

As the decade of the 1980s was drawing to a close, the days of Derg rule in Ethiopia was also coming to an end due to a combination internal and external factors. And with the aim of taking over and ruling the whole of Ethiopia, TPLF leaders were scrambling to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) at this time. Their effort was hardly over when they unseated the Derg in May 1991, in collaboration with the EPLF.

It was at this juncture that the TPLF, EPLF and OLF collaborated in implementing two important policies that left enduring marks on Ethiopia. First, the TPLF and OLF endorsed the EPLF's decades-old insistence on achieving the independence of Eritrea. Second, all three collaborated in drafting the Transitional Charter, which paved the way for restructuring Ethiopia as a multinational federation. Both measures remain highly controversial to this day.

Opinions about the policy of structuring Ethiopia as a multinational federation, in particular, remain starkly divided. There are those, on one hand, who see it as the recipe for Ethiopia's ultimate disintegration. On the other hand, there are those who see as a necessary step to avert this scenario. And I spent the last couple of decades reflecting, reading and writing on this issue.

My efforts regarding this matter led me to draw a number of conclusions. First, the right to self-identification is a basic human and political right the invocation of which allows humans to aggregate for common political action. And this right belongs strictly to the “self” and no one else. It qualifies as a basic human right because stripping individuals of this right amounts to violating their humanity by treating them like objects instead of conscious subjects. And it also qualifies as a fundamental political right because without its invocation humans are unable to organize for the promotion of common purpose: social, political, cultural or religious.

The invocation of the right to self-identification for common purpose is highly contextual. Individuals can, and do, identify themselves as women in one situation, as workers in another and as members of a cultural group in still another. So for me it is no more either class struggle or national struggle but both depending on the prevailing situation and the nature of the matter being contested.

Second, national self-determination simply derives from a particular form of self-identification as the member of a national group. And it has to be exercised in a multidimensional manner and in a recurrent fashion instead of the one-time achievement of independence.

Third, multidimensional self-determination becomes mandatory because most contemporary states happen to be too small and too large at the same time. As succinctly stated by Peter Taylor (2003: 111), “the state as power container tends to preserve existing boundaries; the state as wealth container tends towards larger territories; and the state as cultural container tends towards smaller territories.” Consequently, participatory institutions should be forged at the supra-state regional level as well as at the extant state and sub-state levels.

Fourth, this layering of participatory institutions has fundamental implication for our attitude about democracy. Democracy drawing on the existence of a single *demo* or people has to be reconsidered due to one reason. Instead, we should accept that, under some situations, “the People” category may consist of multiple peoples (Eriksen and Weigaard 2003: 125). In addition, we need to move away from the strictly “vote-centric” type of democracy to the “talk-centric” alternative (Kymlicka and Norman 2000: 9). The “talk-centric” deliberative form of democracy is particularly pertinent at times of important political changes.

Fifth and final, citizenship rights should be expanded to include language and cultural rights and need to be exercised in a layered manner. Citizenship rights have been expanding

generation after generation. The first set of rights that brought citizenship into existence are civil rights: freedom and inviolability of the person; freedom of expression; freedom of religion; equality before the law; and the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of race, gender, origin and the like. This was followed by political rights: the right to vote and to stand for elections; and the freedom of assembly, association and information. Welfare rights were added to these two particularly after WWII. And these are the right to work, equality of opportunity, entitlement to health services, welfare benefits, social services and education.

In more recent times, a number of scholars are advocating that cultural and language rights must be added to the bundle of rights signifying citizenship. Pierre Coulombe (2001: 244) in particular argues that “The last three centuries saw the list of goods considered most worthy to human well-being extended to include not only goods derived from the value of personal autonomy (choice, dignity, etc.) but also goods associated with our communal identity (culture, custom, etc.). Thus cultural rights, such as the right to the preservation of one’s language, now stand side by side with more traditional individual rights, such as the right to freedom of expression and to physical integrity.”

And the formation of participatory institutions at the supra-state regional level as well as the extant state and sub-state levels demands that citizenship should be exercised in a layered manner at all these levels.

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