

Empire State of Ethiopia has long history of conflict

By Gosie Gudeta

To understand the current Ethiopian political crisis the problematic combination of historical circumstances have to be considered. Before the late 19th century, Abyssinia, an old name for an Amhara nation, was different from the present Empire, State of Ethiopia. The Empire after the late 19th century constitutes more than eighty nationalities.

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Each one of these nationalities had its own territory, language and culture. In fact, each one of them used to have its own form of government and lived by itself.

In 1855, an Amhara King called Tewodrose attached the neighboring nationalities. Tewodrose received arms from foreign countries and built his strength. As a result he managed to conquer and subjugate the other nationalities neighbouring Abyssinia. In 1871 another King, Minilik, also received arms from foreign powers and used it against the non-Amhara nationalities such as the Somalis, the Oromos, the Sidamos and

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many others. From then on, through the help of foreign support Minilik fought bitter wars with all nationalities, mainly the Oromos, and col-

onized them. The nationalities were defeated because at that time they were unable to obtain aid from other countries. So they were grouped together by force against their will. This was the time when the major European powers were busy colonizing many countries in Africa and other continents around the globe. Minilik removed many Oromos, Sidamos and others from their land and gave it to his own people, the Amharas; turning the former into the state of Serfdom. However, he could not remove all the Oromos from their land, but had them pay heavy taxes to him and his lords.

Thereafter in 1928, Haile Silasie, another Amhara King, came to power. He followed Minilik's footsteps. He even worked harder than his predecessors to do away with the identities of the Oromo people and other nationalities in that country. He began systematically to eliminate the language and culture of the Oromos and other peoples. Furthermore, he changed the names of towns, cities and places to Amharic names. Many Oromos and other had to change their national names to Amharic names to get jobs or pass examinations at schools.

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At the same time he made the Amharic language the national language of the Empire State of Ethiopia while discouraging all the other languages. Haile Silasie put the Amharas in all key places in his government. However, he assigned people from other nationalities to lower posts.

In 1974, Haile Silasie was dethroned by the military. At first it seemed that many people accepted the provisional military government because it

promised that it would work for the well-being of all nationalities without discrimination and then transfer the leadership to the civilians.

But the military junta failed to keep its promises. The change benefited only the ruling Amharas. The truth is that the Amharas are the ones who still dominate the leadership in that country.

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"More than 97 per cent" of the officials in the present military government are Amharas. The "Amharas are less than 15 per cent" of the total population in the Empire State of Ethiopia. Obviously it is not in the interest of the Amharas to shape political power with people from other nationalities. The whole problem is based on ethnic discrimination. It is similar to racism in South Africa. The difference is it is not based on skin pigmentation like that of South Africa. But in practice both of these discriminations are very similar.

To maintain its power, the military junta, dominated by the Amharas, has been cooperating with some communist countries. The junta gets ammunition from these countries to suppress the non-Amhara nationalities in the Empire. In addition, the junta had been forcing the civilians from these nationalities to join its army and fight against their own oppressed peoples. They are forced to fight against their will simply to keep the Amhara ruling group in power.

The junta also tries to tell them that they should fight in order to build communism in the country. Moreover, the military junta is using Russian supplied jet airplanes to drop Napalm bombs and other chemicals to annihilate people in Oromo, Eritrea and other areas where it is facing open oppositions. On March 21, 1981, for example this air at-

tack on the civilians was confirmed by the Norwegian missionaries who had left the Oromo area due to this problem (Keesings Contemporary Archives, 1981).

Further the junta nationalized the Lutheran Churches in Western Oromo provinces. This is an attack on Oromo people because more than 90 per cent of the church members are Oromos. Many pastors and preachers were put in prisons and are subject to systematic torture.

The nationalities such as the Oromos, the Somalis, the Sidamos and others do not want to allow the Amhara colonial regime to rule over them. The Oromos and other colonized nationalities want to get their independence like the African peoples around them that were at one time colonized by European powers. They say the fact that they were colonized by the black colonial power, the Amharas, does not change the reality and make them appear as if they were not colonized. They would like to remind all those who are opposed to the apartheid policy in South Africa to be consistent and oppose to similar colonization, oppression and discrimination in the Empire State of Ethiopia.

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The Amhara leaders, specifically Minilik, Haile, Silasie and Mengistu tried hard to tell the world that Ethiopia is a Unified Nation - State which could trace its origin to antiquity. However, the myth of Unity

was broken when the non-Amhara nationalities began to stand against the Amhara colonial regime (African Affairs, Oct. 1981). As explained

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before, the Empire State of Ethiopia has never been a well integrated political unit. The nationalities have been held together by colonial power (African Affairs, Oct. 1981).

That is why the Oromos and other nationalities refer to the charter of the United Nations that states "all people have the right to self-determination. By virtue of the right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic social and cultural development." (The United Nations and Human Rights, by the Commission to Study the Organization of Peace, p. 198).

The Oromos do not have any other choice except to work for their national self-determination. The Oromo national movement is an outgrowth of the resentment over the Amhara colonial exploitation for nearly a hundred years.

Now, there is unrest in the army. The military regime has been worried about the unwillingness of the army to continue fighting against the different nationalities (African Confidential, vol. 23). The junta is trying to defuse unrest in the army by increasing salaries. The junta could not convince many to accept its ideas. This is because the soldiers have seen that the junta has been arresting many Oromos and others continuously (Keesings Archives 1980, p. 30592).

As a result of all these problems, many Oromos and other peoples from other nationalities left their land and are still leaving to seek refuge in neighbouring countries: Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya and the Sudan.