The Enduring Challenge of National Integration

Bahru Zewde

Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers
by John Markakis
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The Ethiopian state is at least two thousand years old, tracing its roots to the ancient kingdom of Aksum. That ancient entity gave the country its political culture and its religious identity, in both its Christian and Muslim variations. After a hiatus marked by the contrasting phenomena of political constriction and architectural flourishing, the Aksumite legacy was revived in the thirteenth century through what came to be known as the Solomonic dynasty, which forged an entity that came closest in geographical extent and ethnic composition to the Ethiopia of today. Hence, the constant harking back of Ethiopia's modern emperors – Tewodros, Yohannes, Menilek – to the glorious years of the medieval emperors, as they came to be known. Haile Sellassie was the last of those Solomonic emperors; he presided over the political order for nearly half a century until his dynasty was finally swept away by the 1974 revolution.

Yet, contemporary Ethiopia is very much a creation of Emperor Menilek (r. 1889-1913), who forged the empire-state with a combination of force and diplomacy. His military campaigns of the last quarter of the nineteenth century defined the contours of the Ethiopian empire-state – contours that were sanctified by a series of boundary delimitation agreements that he concluded with the limitrophe colonial powers between 1898 and 1908. Just as his empire-building combined persuasion and brute force, his administration was an amalgam of devolution and central control.

His successor, the teenager prince Iyyasu, had one of the shortest yet eventful reigns in the history of the Ethiopian monarchy, ruling *de facto* 1911-1916 and *de jure* 1913-1916. His short reign exhibited the worst and the best features in the quest for national integration that is the central theme of the book under review. He led a nefarious slave-hunting expedition in southwestern Ethiopia that was to remain a permanent blemish on his rule. Yet, when it came to his Somali subjects in the southeast, he demonstrated a degree of sensitivity to local sentiments that has rarely been matched before or since.

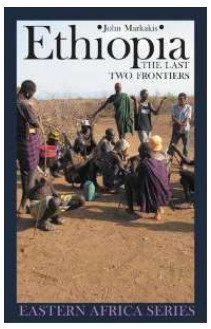
It was under Emperor Haile Sellassie (r. 1930-1974) that, somewhat paradoxically, national integration both attained its highest level and was put to its severest test. The educational system and the military proved two unifying institutions. At the same time, the policy of cultural assimilation and political centralization that the regime assiduously followed ultimately bred centrifugal tendencies that shook it to its foundations. Ethno-nationalist rebellions sprouted in Tigray and Bale, while the absorption of federated Eritrea in 1962 triggered a secessionist movement that resulted in Eritrean independence after some three decades of armed struggle.

Viewed within this context, John Markakis's latest book is a welcome contribution to the ongoing debate on the vexed issue of national integration. Markakis is not new to Ethiopian studies, noted as he is above all for his seminal work on the *ancien régime–Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, published as that regime was entering its terminal stage. What he has offered us now is a comprehensive analysis of the issue of national integration under three regimes: imperial, Darg/military, and EPRDF, separated by the landmark dates of 1974 and 1991. His conclusion, while not so unexpected to the initiated, might sound rather disturbing to the general reader: neither the imperial policy of assimilation nor the Darg's evocation of class struggle, nor for that matter the ethnic federalism of the EPRDF has managed to resolve the issue of national integration. Or, in the words of the author, 'At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the incumbent regime in Addis Ababa is engaged in the same battles that exhausted its predecessors, impoverished the country, and blasted peoples' hopes for peace, democracy and an escape from dire poverty' (p. 14).

The crux of the problem, according to Markakis, is the reluctance of what he calls an 'Abyssinian elite' to share political power with the peripheral elites to any meaningful extent. While the author relies on the centre-periphery paradigm to underpin his analysis, he refines it further by identifying two peripheries (and hence the subtitle): the highland and the lowland ones. Indeed, the bias of the book is towards the lowland rather than the highland periphery, the author's fascination with the former beginning in the 1970s, when he first came into contact with Ethiopian pastoralists. This was reinforced by a three-year consultancy work (2005-2008) that he did with the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs. Data thus gathered was buttressed by interviews he conducted with leaders of the national liberation fronts (NLFs) that have mushroomed in Ethiopia in the past four decades or so.

Markakis writes with greater authority on the lowland periphery, particularly the Somali, than on the highland periphery. His sympathies are also manifestly with the lowland pastoralists, who he claims occupy 52 per cent of the land, even if they constitute only 12 per cent of the population (p. 16). The core and the highland periphery share a similar physical environment, an agrarian economy and a common political system. As a result of daunting climatic and communication barriers,

the lowlands have generally been less integrated into the Ethiopian economy until the 21st century, when their potential for agribusiness has been realized and large swathes of territory, particularly in western Ethiopia, have started being leased out mostly to foreign investors. This development has within it, not only the seeds of economic integration, but also the danger of destroying pastoralist livelihood, quite apart from representing a fundamental shift from the hallowed motto of 'land to the tiller' to 'land to the investor'.



To better understand the hitherto neglected lowland periphery, Markakis has made good use of the social anthropological research that has mushroomed in recent decades. Sadly, however, he appears to be oblivious of the many equally useful data contained in history theses and dissertations written over a period of some four decades. This probably accounts in part for the many historical inaccuracies that mar an otherwise perceptive and well-documented analysis. Of these inaccuracies, more below.

Perhaps the most fascinating and often troubled relationship between centre and periphery (of the lowland variety) was the one between Addis Ababa and the Afar. The tentacles of central control notwithstanding, the Afar Sultanate managed to forge an autonomous existence to a degree few other regions managed to enjoy. Muhammad Hanfare under Menilek and Ali Mirah under Haile Sellassie were the two dominant Afar personalities. Although Menilek waged a punitive expedition against the former on the eve of the Battle of Adwa (1896), he otherwise reserved for him the kind of respect and recognition that he showed for other peripheral rulers among the Western Oromo and in Beni Shangul. However, the respect that Ali Mirah enjoyed under Haile Sellassie did not save his region from the forcible intrusion of commercial agriculture, spearheaded by the British Mitchell Cotts and the even more challenging government undertaking known as the Awash Valley Authority (AVA).

Yet, what is interesting is the dexterity with which the Afar sultan adapted to the new situation by engaging in large-scale cotton plantation himself. Markakis recounts this ambivalent relationship between centre and periphery by having recourse, among others, to the recently published memoirs of the sultan. What these memoirs underscore is the kind of dual authority that was exercised in Awsa, as the Afar sulatanate was known: the traditional authority of the sultan and the central government authority represented by the *awraja* (sub-province) governor, who, interestingly enough, was trying to exercise his authority rather discreetly from the highland outpost of Bati, rather than from the awraja capital, Assayita. The venerable Sultan reminisced about his experience under imperial rule in the following terms: 'Even if there was probably oppression in the rest of the country, the Emperor looked at us peripheral rulers with some respect. We had good relations with him. He never interfered directly in our internal affairs. I had direct access to his palace or his office'.[1]

This ambivalent relationship gave way to downright confrontation with the coming of the Darg in 1974, precipitating the sultan's flight to Saudi Arabia and his assumption of the leadership of the Afar Liberation Front (ALF), one of the many ethno-nationalist guerrilla organizations that fought against the Darg until its overthrow in 1991. As an ally of the EPRDF, Ali Mirah and the organization that he headed were given a slice of the political cake and he was restored to his position in Awsa. There was a resumption of the kind of parallel authority that had prevailed under the imperial regime, with the difference this time, however, that the pro-EPRDF regional ruler was himself an Afar and was based in the Afar heartland, unlike the imperial representative who was an Amhara and was officiating from the highlands.

What is equally striking is the longevity of Afar traditional rulers. Muhammad Anfare ruled for just over four decades (1861-1902). Ali Mirah partook of three divergent Ethiopian regimes and his rule lasted even longer (1944-2011), minus the 16 years or so he was in exile (1975-1991). Similarly, the pro-EPRDF regional (kilil) president, Ismail Ali Siro, has been in office since 1995. The contrast with the neighbouring Somali region, which witnessed eleven regional presidents in just sixteen years (1992-2008), is stark indeed. Markakis explains this 'circulation of the elite', as he dubs it, by arguing that 'The relationship of the Ethiopian state with its Somali subjects under ethnic federalism is as volatile as it has been since the making of the empire' (p. 327). This had to do with the volatility of Somali politics in general. In no small measure, however, it also had to do with the presence, until 1990 at any rate, of a neighbouring state, Somalia, with irredentist ambitions of uniting all the Somali-speaking peoples of the Horn of Africa.

Ultimately, though, the major challenge to the agenda of national integration in Ethiopia was to come from within rather than from without the country. This was represented by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), founded in 1984 by former representatives of the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). While the WSLF had acted as a spearhead for the irredentist ambitions of the Mogadisho regime, including the most ambitious and ultimately most disastrous bid to realize them with the invasion of 1977, ONLF had eschewed both the irredentist agenda and the Islamist orientation of other Somali movements that had sprouted in the last decades of the twentieth century. In the new political dispensation of post-1991 Ethiopia, it emerged as the major Somali political organization. But, its rapprochement with the EPRDF proved short-lived. The rupture came with its call for a referendum to determine the fate of the Ogaden region by invoking the principle of self-determination up to and including secession – a principle enshrined in the charter of the Ethiopian Transitional Government, as indeed subsequently in the 1994 Constitution.

Thereafter, ONLF took the path of armed struggle, a trajectory that assumed a decidedly irreversible character with its massacre in 2007 of an Ethio-Chinese oil-prospecting team in the Ogaden and the government reprisals that ensued. The EPRDF agenda came to be served by the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL), founded in February 1994 and subsequently transformed into the (Ethiopian) Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) after it merged with a breakaway faction or 'legal wing' of the ONLF.

The Afar and Somali represent contrasting tales of the saga of national integration. Yet, both gave rise to national liberation fronts, though admittedly of varying stridency or virulence. Indeed, in the era of NLFs that the 1980s came to be, such fronts sprouted up in the western as in the eastern lowland periphery, notably in the form of the Gambella People's Liberation Movement and the Beni Shangul Liberation Movement. In the final analysis, however, the real test for the regime at the centre was to come from the highland periphery and even more seriously from the Abyssinian core. One has in mind here in particular the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), respectively. Partly because of the general thrust of the book, the author tells us more about the former than about the latter. This includes not only the detailed historical background on the Oromo, albeit with a few disturbing historical inaccuracies, but also the transition of the OLF from a major partner in the Transitional Government in its first year to an outlawed opposition.

Ultimately, however, it was the combined onslaught of the TPLF and the EPLF that brought about the end of the military regime in 1991. They were the progenitors of the ideology of national liberation. That ideology had its origins in the Ethiopian student movement. Markakis is right to point out that 'The Ethiopian radicals set about the task [of creating a new order] armed with an ideology borrowed whole-cloth from abroad, and proceeded single-mindedly to try and turn a pre-modern society into a post-modern utopia, making no concession to time or place' (p. 180). But, although he does recognize the role of the students as the harbingers of the 1974 revolution, he does not sufficiently emphasize the central importance that the 'national question' – as it came to be known – assumed in the student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Far from seeking to maintain 'centre hegemony', they had come to question the fundamental tenets of that hegemony. By 1971, both the European and North American wings of the student movement have adopted in their respective congresses the principle of self-determination up to and including secession for all the nationalities of Ethiopia.

It was this principle, first adumbrated in the ranks of the student movement, that came to be integrated in the constitutions of the two antagonistic leftist organizations that emerged from that movement: the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (more commonly known by its Amharic acronym, Ma'ison). While the two organizations ultimately came to distance themselves from that principle, TPLF stuck to it with orthodox zeal until it came to be enshrined first in the Transitional Charter of 1991 and then in the 1994 constitution. The essential value of the work under review is its exposure of the fundamental contradiction between principle and practice, rhetoric and reality. The weight of evidence, the author argues, is that ethnic federalism, far from guaranteeing genuine autonomy for the periphery, has tended to preserve 'the hegemony of the centre, albeit with new structures and corps of centre and peripheral elites' (p. 304). Or, as he graphically puts it, 'the elite in the centre continue to rule; the elite in the periphery continue to administer' (p. 282).

It is a pity that a work of such importance and erudition has come to be marred by quite a few historical inaccuracies, errors that could have been easily avoided had the manuscript had the benefit of a historian's feedback. These inaccuracies are disturbingly frequent in the first two parts of the book, i.e. the historical background. To begin with the chronological slips, the Oromo migrations took place in the 16th century, not the 17th. The rinderpest epidemic that triggered the Great Ethiopian Famine broke out in 1888, not 1886. Kafa, not Jimma, was occupied in 1897; the latter had already been subdued in 1882. And the inland port of Gambella was inaugurated in 1904, not 1907. Even more puzzling for someone so conversant with recent Ethiopian history are the errors for the dates of the abortive coup of 1960 (given as 1961: p. 116) and the coronation of Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1930 (dated 1935: p. 159).

Nor are these historical slips and inaccuracies confined to the chronological. The mix-up about Leqa Naqamte and Leqa Qellam (p. 92) could have been easily rectified by reference to the many historical studies that have been conducted on both. Gurage resistance to Menilek's expansion was spearheaded, not by Darssano (p. 96) but by Hasan Enjamo. While it is true that Lej Iyyasu never had himself crowned, it is inaccurate to state that he 'never succeeded to the throne' (p. 108). Could the balabat be described as having been 'subordinate to the lowest neftegna'? Also, while it is true that much of the investment in commercial agriculture was made in the periphery, the same cannot be said of

manufacturing industry (p. 120); only Dire Dawa could probably qualify for this designation. One has also to be careful not to confuse the language spoken with ethnic identity (p. 126); many non-Amhara could end up describing themselves as Amharic-speaking.

It is to be hoped that future editions of the work would rectify these anomalies, for the work otherwise represents an important contribution by a long-standing observer of the Ethiopian scene to the ongoing debate on centre-periphery relations, or, in the hallowed phrase of the Left, the 'national question'.

Note

1. Aramis Houmed Soulé, 2011, *Deux vies dans l'histoire de la Corne de l'Afrique: Les sultans 'Afar Mahammad Hanfaré (r. 1861-1902) & 'Ali-Mirah Hanfaré (1944-2011),* Addis Abeba: Centre français des études éthiopiennes.