Ethiopia and Regional Integration

By:

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Because Ethiopia is the headquarters of the African Union its role on regional integration is usually taken as given. It is usually assumed that the state has and is making efforts to integrate with the continent. In this essay, I contend that Ethiopia's historical engagement with regional integration has been at best passive and vague. On the contrary, its focus on regional integration at the moment seems different and active. Its recent activism for regional integration, for instance, ratification of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), is the result of Ethiopia's aspirations for economic, political, and social transformations.

In this essay, I will summarize the concept of regional integration for four Ethiopian leaders who attempted to transform Ethiopia economically, ideologically, regionally, and internationally. Namely: I will look at Haile Selassie, Mengistu Haile-Mariam, Meles Zenawi and Abiy Ahmed. I am skipping the government of Desalegn Hailemariam, as his economic policies are strikingly similar to that of Zenawi. In his speech for the first Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit, Haile Selassie comes as a voice that negotiates the competing integration trajectories proposed by Julius Nyerere and Kwame

Nkrumah. Haile Selassie proposes the lowest denominator – gradual integration – as the viable alternative to reach continental integration.

As I have argued before, for Haile Selassie, regional integration was more about showing the former colonial powers that Africa can unite and less about how it will integrate. Although Haile Selassie is celebrated for modernizing Ethiopia, his feudal leadership disenfranchised many and eventually led to his dethroning. Mengistu Haile-Mariam's accession to power signified a shift in ideological and cold-war alliances for Ethiopia. His 1983 speech as the chairman of the OAU shows that for Haile-Mariam the OAU was nothing but a platform to externalize Ethiopia's problems. Nevertheless, during his reign, Ethiopia was the founding member of the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD), an organization established to combat the 1980s drought and famine.

It seems to me that Ethiopia's role as a founding member both in the OAU and IGAD is a circumstantial happening rather than aspirational activism for African integration. Just like Selassie, Haile-Mariam resorted to violence and marginalized ethnic minorities. For Zenawi Ethiopia's economic transformation is based on the ideals of a developmental state where the state controls "the commanding heights of the economy so as to be able to lead the private sector (banks, utilities, some key production sectors)." In the early 1990s for Zenawi (although previously a member of the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray) it was important for Ethiopia to adopt neoliberal development policies. However, in the early 2000s, Ethiopia remapped its development policies to reflect a mixture of models that promoted state control and marketization. Zenawi, with a particular focus on economic growth and poverty alleviation engaged in economic diplomacy without actual trade liberalization at the continental level. Just like his predecessors Zenawi excluded many and failed to create inclusive development.

Despite significant growth, Ethiopia's economic transformation is far from over. With a population over 100 million and half a million school leavers annually, Prime Minister Ahmed is confronted with creating an inclusive and redistributive economic policy. An economy that creates not only GDP growth but also opportunities for decent work and entrepreneurship for the sixty million Ethiopians who are under the age of twenty-four. At Davos, Ahmed summarized

his policy for the economic transformation of Ethiopia as *Medemer*. *Medemer* is an Amharic word that can be translated to mean 'addition' or 'coming together.' For Ahmed, *Medemer* has three pillars: (1) vibrant democracy, (2) economic vitality, and (3) regional integration and openness to the world. Ahmed released all political prisoners and invited opposition groups back to Ethiopia. On the economic front, Ahmed unveiled privatization plans for state-owned Ethio-Telecom, Ethiopian Airlines among others.

The proposed privatization plan is yet to happen. However, by proposing partial sell-off of key state-owned companies, one can contend that Ahmed's policy centers the state in the economy. Ahmed contends that regional integration is central for peaceful coexistence and creating economies of scale in the Horn of Africa. He signed a peace declaration with Eritrea ending the twenty years no-war-no-peace situation. And across the several meetings between the Horn of Africa leaders the phrase 'regional integration' seems to soar. However, the discussions on regional integration are very brief and leave out significant details. This makes me wonder if, across the Horn of Africa, the phrase 'regional integration' is being used with its full conceptual and theoretical understanding. Homogenous ethnic groups with social, linguistic, and religious affinity are spread across territorial boundaries of Horn of African states.

This raises an interesting question: whether an alternative integration model – ground up – is possible in the region? An integration model that reflects and redefines development not just as economic growth but also as redistribution and inclusion for the people of the region. I believe Ethiopia's ratification of the AfCFTA albeit top-down is a step in the right direction. Having said that Ethiopia's fractured ethnic federation puts the state at a cross roads.

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