

The ‘Bantustanization’ of Ethiopia and Its Looming Dangers

By Dawit W Giorgis

The term Balkanization has frequently been used in reference to Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism, which has been codified in the country’s dysfunctional constitution that curiously defines politics, citizenship, rights and privileges on ethnic grounds. However, the use of the term Balkanization in reference to the current situation in Ethiopia is inaccurate, since it does not fully capture the toxic agenda of the architects of the country’s constitution or the misguided policies of the current government.

Strictly speaking, there are no political or administrative terms in history that can fully and adequately explain the bizarre experiment that we see unraveling in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, a term, which comes close to describing the policies of the current government and the unfolding ethnic violence and repression, is ‘bantustanization,’ which has its origin in apartheid South Africa.

“The 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act relabeled the reserves as “homelands,” or Bantustans, in which only specific ethnic groups were to have residence rights. Later, the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 defined blacks living throughout South Africa as legal citizens of the homelands designated for their particular ethnic groups—thereby stripping them of their South African citizenship and their few remaining civil and political rights. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the white-dominated South African government continuously removed black people still living in “white areas”—even those settled on property that had been in their families for generations—and forcibly relocated them to the Bantustans.”

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bantustan>

Bantustanization dehumanizes a population and makes one race superior to others. It confines people to homelands with restricted access to other parts of the country, as was the case in apartheid South Africa. The Bantustans were administrative regions designed to exclude blacks from the South African political system, which was dominated by the white minority under the policy of apartheid — an institutionalized form of segregation and racism.

The idea behind the apartheid ideology was to allow the whites to own the larger proportion of the country with enormous natural resources and to establish small and weak enclaves, separated and dependent on the racist government. The ultimate objective was to convert these Bantustans into independent satellite states, with full recognition by the international community. However, the apartheid ideology was completely rejected by the

international community and the apartheid regime and its cruel policy eventually collapsed. Bantustans were subsequently incorporated with South Africa.

Bantustanization in Ethiopia

As the Ethiopian leaders responsible for the chaos in the country very well know, it is virtually impossible to carve out any part or region of the country and create a viable state. Ethiopian ethnic groups can only exist within a united Ethiopia, and the existence of Ethiopia is sine *qua non* to the survival of all. The history, the geography, the demographic distribution and the shared culture and heritage of the people are so intertwined, they do not allow for either 'bantustanization' or complete secession. Despite this fact, the ruling regime seems to be determined to create Bantustans under the subjugation of the dominant and ruling ethnic group.

Tragically, the US did not take firm actions on apartheid or the policy of Bantustans in racist South Africa at the time. Instead, it stood by the segregationist nation, and even allied with it in declaring a costly war on the legitimate government of Angola and in delaying the independence of Namibia. President Reagan, who served as US President from 1981 to 1989, used the phrase "constructive engagement" as a euphemism for dialogue with South Africa:

"His rhetoric of constructive engagement was a cover for doing nothing, actually doing more than doing nothing, really providing American support for a retrograde regime" (1). Reagan staunchly opposed economic sanctions around 1985, while stating publicly that he condemned the inequity in South Africa, revealing "the historical US tendency to rhetorically denounce South Africa's racial policies while simultaneously doing little to change the established status quo" <https://prospectjournal.org/2011/10/21/americas-role-in-the-end-of-south-african-apartheid/>

It was the civil rights movement that eventually forced the administration to take a stand against apartheid. The anti apartheid movement: "culminated in congressional passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid of 1986, which mandated a variety of sanctions designed to force the dismantling of apartheid" (IBID) overriding President Reagan's veto.

"When Nelson Mandela was freed from jail in 1988, Republicans tried to sweep their support for his erstwhile jailers under the rug. President George H.W. Bush hosted Mandela at the White House and praised him as "a man who embodies the hopes of millions." Mandela gave a speech to Congress at which the assembled legislators, including many who had once voted against economic sanctions, interrupted him with three standing ovations and 12 rounds of applause. Today, leaders of both parties have once again cheered for Mandela.

What he really could have used was their help when he was imprisoned on Robben Island, trying to end apartheid.”

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/19/apartheid-amnesia/>

However the liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), and its leader, Nelson Mandela, remained to be listed as terrorists until 2008.

Herman Cohen’s Sinister Ploy

Ironically, certain individuals in the US appear to be inclined to repeat the sad history of apartheid now in Ethiopia. A case in point is the recent diatribe by Mr. Herman Cohen, former Assistant Secretary of State in the US department of state, ambassador, senior diplomat and author, in which he insinuated the idea of taking Ethiopia back to those shameful years of apartheid and ‘bantustanization’ in South Africa. Mr. Herman Cohen was an active member of the administration when the US refused to take a firm action on apartheid and ‘bantustanization.’

He tweeted on June 24:

“Failed coup in #Ethiopia’s state was an attempt by ethnic nationalists to restore Amhara hegemony over all of Ethiopia that existed for several centuries prior to 1991. That dream is now permanently dead.”

And on July 19:

“Violence in #Ethiopia's Sidama, after similar events in Oromia, Amhara and Somali states, tells us the Ethiopian people will never again allow return to all-powerful authoritarian central govts as under the Emperors, the Derg and the EPRDF/TPLF. The future is true federalism.”

Ethiopians to date do not know what really happened in Bahr Dar, the day of the so-called coup, which is by the way a misnomer. I am curious to know how Mr. Cohen came to know that the killings in Bahr Dar were: “an attempt by ethnic nationalist to restore Amhara hegemony over all of Ethiopia”? Mr. Cohen further asserts: “ that dream is now permanently dead”. Even those very close to power do not yet know what really happened in Bahr Dar. It leads one to assume that Mr. Cohen has exclusive access to the Prime Minister who is the only one that has the complete information regarding this ‘coup’ and the killings of so many people including top officials, information which the PM has yet to share with the Ethiopian People.

Mr. Herman Cohen is once again on the wrong side of history. His assertion of Amhara’s hegemony in Ethiopia for centuries, which he took out from the propaganda leaflets of the TPLF, has shocked many. He exposed his utter ignorance. The responses to his tweet have adequately addressed this. It is

however troubling to realize that it was this man with such ignorance of Ethiopian history, who decided on the fate of Ethiopia in 1991, at the London conference, which he convened and chaired. It was supposed to be a negotiation with the interested parties including the Ethiopian government. The Ethiopian government walked out because Mr. Cohen had already decided on the take over of Ethiopia by TPLF. As a result of this ill-fated decision Ethiopians suffered for 28 years and the country is now near collapse.

The people of Ethiopia forgave Herman Cohen, but never forgot his crimes, when he eventually acknowledged his blunders and regretted his decision, after hundreds of thousands had perished, millions were subjected to Zenawi's atrocious rule and the country was brought to the brink of disintegration.

Now Mr. Cohen reappears and once again meddles in the affairs of Ethiopia by advocating the break up of Ethiopia. He suggests that "true federalism" is having more 'killils' (ethnic homelands). Ethiopia has 90 nationalities and establishing homelands for all is the ultimate definition of democracy for Mr. Cohen. How does 'bantustanization' prevent "the return to all-powerful authoritarian central governments as under the Emperors, the Derg and the EPRDF/TPLF."?

The policy that he is irresponsibly propagating is one that would potentially lead to civil war and genocide within Ethiopia, cause considerably devastating instability in neighboring countries, and trigger proxy wars. In the scenario he is promoting, there is a high probability that the Horn of Africa would literally be on fire in the truest sense, with the Arab World and the US scrambling to secure their interests in the Red Sea and in the region. If a civil war starts in Ethiopia the world would also have to brace itself for an unprecedented flow of refugees in all directions, with most destined to Europe across the Sahara. North African coasts would be inundated with Ethiopian and other refugees from the affected neighboring countries in numbers that would pale the recent migrations from that part of Africa in comparison.

Regrettably, it is such senseless arguments as put forth by Mr. Cohen, with a narrow and myopic agenda, that have often put the US on the wrong side of history, as evidenced by recent events in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt and Libya. The failure of the US to respond in the face of the unfolding genocide in Rwanda should have been a bitter lesson. President Clinton and the late United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, despite their belated apologies and acceptances of a degree of responsibility, failed humanity by not responding to the clear early warnings. As a consequence, a million people were massacred and 800,000 people fled the country. The tragedy did not need to happen, but it did; and the US and the international community today live with the indelible scar of guilt and infamy.

Looming Dangers

People have been warning the international community for the last decade about the build up in Ethiopia. We now see genocide unfolding in the country and the silence of the US and the international community is stunning. It seems as if no lessons have been taken away from Rwanda's experience. People can only hope that there are seasoned people within the State Department who can understand and mitigate the implications of the irresponsible statements and proposals of discredited individuals like Mr. Herman Cohen.

Those who know Ethiopia do understand that the country cannot break up and an attempt to do so will only introduce an endless civil war, with implications that go far beyond the region. To create a Bantustan, one only needs to apply brute force and military power; however, to dream of ruling over a nation of Bantustans and living in peace is an impossible proposition.

Sadly, the Ethiopian government is giving the finishing touch for the creation of a Bantu-style administrative structure with extremists monopolizing political and economic power. The process of 'bantustanization', which is underway will ensure that all the other ethnic regions (Kilils or Bantustans) become weak and incapable to challenge the dominant group at the helm of power. The Ethiopian constitution allows the ethnic-based regions (Bantustans) to secede if they wish to. The attempt by some Ethiopian ethnic groups to exercise their rights to secede will not be successful but will lead to conflicts. Like the Bantustans of South Africa they will not be able to get any recognition. Since each ethnic group does not have a clearly defined boundary accepted by all parties, it will also be one more reason for conflict, as is evident now throughout the country. Unlike the Bantustans, the demography does not allow one region of Ethiopia to be exclusively of one ethnic group, since millions of people of different ethnic backgrounds live scattered in many parts of the country. Like the Bantustans they cannot be viable independent states.

The policy of this government is primitive and those elites who are behind these policies should be tried for crimes against humanity and for deliberately and intentionally creating the conditions for civil war and possible genocide. Bantustanization is inhumane and should be recognized as a crime under international law.

The regime in Ethiopia is accelerating the fragmentation of Ethiopia into several more weak 'killis' to ensure that the regime would be unchallenged. There is even an attempt to further fragment some of the major

ethnic groups, as is the case with the Amharas, which seem to pose the greatest challenge to the hegemony of one ethnic group. The shortsighted strategy of this regime is to divide the Amharas along regional lines. This exercise has been launched in subtle ways and there are signs of some cracks in the Amhara community. Currently there are nine 'killis'; but with the recent movement in the south to create more 'killis', the door seems to be open now for more than 80 to claim their own 'killis.'

Seriously concerned that it might be a prelude to genocide and civil war, the people of Ethiopia are resisting the government's dangerous policy of 'batustanization'. It also behooves the international community to condemn the unsound policy, as it did condemn decades ago the establishment of the Bantustans in South Africa as an integral component of its apartheid policy. In particular, the people of Ethiopia once again call upon the international community to put pressure on the government so that the worst scenario can be prevented.

Statement like that of Mr. Cohen only enflame the already tense and charged political atmosphere. Responsible and eminent people should do everything possible to use their influence to deescalate the tense situation, advise and support the government to establish a national conference of genuinely elected representatives of the people to have an open dialogue amongst themselves and design a road map for the country. Let such an internationally sponsored conference of the people determine the fate of this country, not a handful of extremists.

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