

The Horn of Africa and Underdevelopment: The Cultural Challenge

These days it's beyond an axiomatic fact that countries in the African continent are undergoing "underdevelopment" in socioeconomic and political domains. This is especially very much of a crude and sour reality for the otherwise historically and culturally rich Horn of Africa. Very near to the red sea on the right, Nile river coming out from its heart (more than 80%), naturally endowed with productive land, natural gas, Gold and Uranium, the torch bearer of earlier monotheisms of Christianity and Islam in the world, the center of perhaps the third most powerful Empire before the seventh century, is the most under nourished, undemocratic, and more generally, the most underdeveloped breeding ground for poverty and misery in the world. This part of the world, especially countries like Ethiopia, Somali, and Eritrea, is typically known for its unsettling and cyclical draught and famine, ethnic and religious based discriminations and violence, close to zero record of respecting human and democratic rights, constant state sponsored crimes and violence against any perceived "enemies" of the state, and many more!

If one looks at UNDP's annual report on Human Development Index (HDI) for countries in the horn of Africa, they symbolize archetypal instances of chronic poverty in the world. HDI examines, among other things, levels of education, health, human security, income, and empowerment in the world. Of the four major categories of human development, countries in the Horn of Africa are located in what UNDP labeled "Low Human Development" zone. By these measurements of development, HDI's five years consecutive annual reports unveil unpleasant reality for the horn. They are either stuck in the place where they were, or ascended southward. In 2010, Ethiopia was ranked 157th and Djibouti 147th of the 169 countries addressed in the report. Of the 187 countries examined in 2011, Eritrea was 177th, Djibouti 165th and Ethiopia 174th. By 2013, Eritrea descended into 181st and Ethiopia 173rd out of 186 countries in the list. In the year 2014, the HDI for Djibouti went down to 170th, Eritrea to 182nd and Ethiopia to 173rd place, out of 187 countries evaluated. Last year, except for some degree of improvement in Djibouti's rank, 168th, Eritrea and Ethiopia reached their lowest points since 2010, 186th and 174th, consecutively, out of 188 countries considered for the report.

It appears UNDP is unable to access reliable data on the socioeconomic conditions of Somalia, another center of food insecurity and poverty in the Horn. To be sure, without the necessary reference to any published data, however, it can be argued that the state of affair in Somalia is by no means different. Or, better yet, much worse than any of the countries in the Horn. In any case, this is, of course, in spite of "playing dumb" by ruling regimes in the countries of the Horn. Put differently, many of the ruling elites in the Horn are known for engaging in "statistically informed confusion campaigns" aiming either at maintaining their status quo with their past-present-and-future cooked data of "development", and as such, instill a sense of false hope among the public; or, alternatively, eliciting foreign aid and support for showing "progresses" in their respective societies.

The Double Faces of Cultural Challenge

Of the four countries in the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea share a lot of things in common. From history, culture and physical characteristics to the levels of poverty, and, to a lesser or greater extent, causes of underdevelopment as well. An addition to this is the fact that the relative conditions of stability, either in economic or political terms, in one affects, in some ways, the fate of the other. This is particularly the case for how Ethiopia is generally felt in the overall geopolitical climate of East Africa in general and the Horn of Africa, in particular. For Kidane Mengisteab too, in his *The Horn of Africa* (2014), any significant socioeconomic and political changes in Ethiopia have tremendous consequences for the rest of countries in the Horn. This is not, obviously, surprising given the historical legacies of Abyssinian Empire, be it good or bad, in the region. Apart from this more or less apparently strong consanguinity, they also share similar development stifling factors. Of these factors, the following two merit close reflection.

First, one of the key determining conditions underlying any society is to what extent its subconscious past, working latently, is hunting it down to the present and under what circumstances reconciled itself with it. It follows that any unresolved, historically evolving, and reluctantly repressed, drives will ultimately demand some sort of safety valves to unload. The reconciling mechanisms can also range from symptom alleviations to radical transformations. Now, one of such unresolved internal contradictions that go way back to earlier centuries in the East Africa in general and the Horn of Africa, in particular, is religion. It is a

fundamental invisible dividing contour for many of the countries in the East, from between south Sudan and Sudan, to Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti. An attempt has recently been made to reconcile between the people of Sudan, Christians and traditional religion followers in the south, and the Muslim majority in the North; however, without any tangible successes for a variety of other contributing factors-including the involvement of external hands, competing political actors, and ethnic frictions. This is a kind of transformative approach to resolving, a perceived or actual, internal contradictions.

A good example of reformative, symptom alleviation to the very issue of religion in the Horn is to be found in Ethiopia. It is a well grounded claim that Ethiopia inherited “the triple heritages”, of Judeo-Christian religious tradition, Islam, and local belief systems. However, to what extent did Ethiopia play this out is a good question to start off and ponder over. Of these, the *Bete Isreal* are, as it appears, being sent out as a black Jews to Israel, and unfortunately, massively undergoing identity crisis, and face discrimination and racism. Yet, the centripetal forces of destabilization, uncertainty, and ultimately, stifling and/or shaping the present and future of Ethiopia is to be searched elsewhere, Muslim-Christian relations in the country. Whether these peoples have lived a utopian life of “tolerance” or “forbearance” is a matter of nuanced analytical vantage points open to all.

To be sure, one thing is beyond any reasonable doubt, that Muslims are raising a legitimate concern for underdevelopment in the Ethiopian society, and being cognizant of this situation, the current fragile government attempted, at least in principle, to mitigate through some “positive discrimination” mechanisms in some Muslim majority regions of the country, such as Somalia, Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz. This is not, however, at heart a fundamental attitude for real transformative change in the religious landscape of the country. Even worse, the post 2010 period practically unveiled what this government has kept hidden for years, a move to silence, for once and for all, any legitimate concern for identity, economy and freedom for religion in the country. Government sponsored Ahabash sect is the ultimate expression of this move in the recent years. As of 2015, apart from religion, especially the challenge posited by Muslims, multiple identity groups and political actors are added to the list of resent in the current system in Ethiopia. All in all, although the Muslim-Christian relation is less of a concern among the general population, it still stands as a fundamental cause of concern if any genuine development of Ethiopia is to begin to be envisioned. Without the necessary and genuine involvement of Muslims as indispensable stakeholders in Ethiopia, what the future hold may even be something worse.

Another dimension to this problem is an increasing politicization of Islam, and ultimately, Muslims in the Horn. Islam and Muslims are not only assaulted under the banner of terrorism (and anti-terrorism laws) in Ethiopia, but also in Somalia. A close ally of the global anti-terrorist campaigner, USA, the Ethiopian government has been the watch dog of any perceived, actual or potential terrorist movements in the horn. Apart from the alleged murder and rape in Somalia, the existing Ethiopian regime still tirelessly pursues the policy of “chaos-in-chaos-out” at home. This is a classical form of political-administrative trick basically planned to introduce a problem in volatile situations, and eventually, emerge as a solution to the problem itself created. This could then potentially allow the possibility of garnering some kind of sentimental convection or legitimacy from the general population, and if successfully orchestrated and played out well, it could also likely to attract and win foreign aid and support for its “move” on “anti-terrorism”. By the same token, the politicization of Islam is also a serious cause of concern within Somalia as well. The exacerbating deep economic and political consequence of the fight between Al-Shabab and the government still largely looms in the broader Horn. This is not, however, the only unresolved internal contradiction that constantly reduces this region to a conflict ridden zone, but also ethnic related sensibilities.

The second foundational unresolved internal contradiction that constantly hunts down the Horn of Africa is the question of various ethnic groups. At the center of various identity groups, religious or ethnic, however, critically lies the issue of just development. Problems of equity and equality in access to and use of economic resources, and to some context, access to political power, especially among the people of Somalia and Ethiopia, are the centrifugal forces of underdevelopment and nemesis in the Horn.

The ethnic dimension of poverty and socioeconomic crisis in the horn is so much complex and historically enduring that it merits to be called the bone of any existential threat to the countries in the Horn. This has long been at the center of distrust, civil violence, and destruction of any developmental engagements in Somalia despite the fact that the people collectively follow a similar religious school. Competing different ethnic groups have also been shaking the Ethiopian state for a long period of time. Ethnic identity and access to economic resources have been the major questions of, particularly, the people of Oromo in Ethiopia. Similar challenges are also currently being posited by the people of Amhara and other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. In spite of this reality on the ground, much like the solution provided to religious

concerns in Ethiopia, the strategy designed to help address this problem also assumes more of an adaptive reformation than transformation. From constitutional recognition to regional reconfigurations, the Ethiopian Federal arrangement tried to systematically control the danger of disintegration, often accompanied by a psychological warfare, of labeling supposed “deviant” ethnic groups and punishing them.

In short, unless the countries in the horn understand the gravity of these situations, any blind attempt to resolve them would prove immensely fatal and counterproductive. As the aforementioned lines briefly show, the foremost developmental challenges facing the Horn of Africa are necessarily cultural, and naturally, the wrong diagnosis of them as well. Colonial legacies, except for Ethiopia, and inefficient state operations have ultimately exacerbated, or alternatively, served as secondary-contributing factors, for poverty and underdevelopment in the Horn. Yet, If there is going to be any hope for change, and thus, development in the region, then one must-necessarily begin by reconciling these two key internal contradictions for once and for all. In this regard, an inside-out approach to development might be what is needed in the Horn.