



Typical Amahara landscape near village of Adefaa

## Exclusion and national cohesion

Every government in Ethiopia faces the same three problems: poverty, multi-ethnicity and a history of internal oppression and violence. The Ethiopian constitution guarantees fundamental freedoms, including equality for men and women, a parliamentary democracy, and space for civil society organisations. It offers autonomy and cultural identity to ethnic groups. On paper it looks fine, but does the reality live up to it?

There are now few reminders of the travel permits needed for visits outside the capital and the numerous road-blocks that characterised the military rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam. One can move freely. Journeys are shorter, as the roads have improved. In an hour instead of two you reach a spot where some hundred peasant women are sitting under a tree. They belong to the Oromo, the country's largest ethnic group with some 26 million people. Their meeting is evidence of the greater freedom that exists for voluntary organisations and other civil bodies. Many of those present had been abducted and raped when they were young, and so ended up being married off. Many elders in their villages gloss over this by saying that it is part of the tradition of some ethnic groups.

These victims of abduction have been brought together by the Oromo grassroots organisation, Hundee. Mrs Majitu, one of their workers, encourages the women to talk about their experiences. One tells me: "My three daughters were abducted. They were ten, eleven and twelve. A group of youngsters kept the eldest a few weeks in the forest. Afterwards she needed so much medical care that we had to sell two oxen to pay the doctor's bill."

### A better human rights record

Those involved in human rights in Ethiopia point out that fear, tension and violence are endemic. Historian Bahru Zewde says it always has been like that. "Control over the state and its resources has always demanded the force of arms", he says. "Inscriptions on old stone slabs in

Axum from the beginning of the Christian era talk about war, the number of enemies killed and the cattle taken. Since then not much has changed. Warrior kings dominate Ethiopia's history." Professor Bahru concedes that the present government is subtler in its methods of control. In his view there is relatively little violence at the moment, except in the south. He argues that drought and inadequate government policies are now the main problems.

Most Ethiopians, whether pro- or anti-government, agree that the human rights record has improved since 1991. People discuss sensitive issues quite openly. Both the English and Amharic media can be outspoken and critical of the ruling party. Although abduction of women has not disappeared, the Government has set up women's bureaux at the federal and regional level. There is equality for men and women. The Government actively seeks dialogue with opposition forces. The constitution guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms and there is parliamentary democracy.

### A long way still to go

But there is still a gap between the officially declared intentions of the federal government and the practical situation at the regional and local level. Academics, students, journalists and members of civil society are harassed and sometimes even killed. Dr Merera Gudina of the opposition Oromo National Congress (ONC) says that Ethiopia is in transition, but "it is one without democratisation". Of the 547 seats in the Council of People's Representatives, the

opposition occupies only 13. He says that if opposition parties try to recruit support in the country they are subject to harassment by security forces. When students demonstrated in the campus of Addis Ababa University in April 2001, police moved in leaving 30 dead and several hundred injured and arrested. Some fled the country.

Serious human rights violations occurred in March last year in the town of Tepi in south-west Ethiopia. Following a clash resulting in the deaths of some policemen and demonstrators, the government sent in Special Forces. More than 100 people were killed. Over a thousand houses were burned down or demolished and 400 people were detained. An EU investigation, reluctantly allowed by the government, referred to "excessive and disproportionate use of force" by the Special Forces.

One might therefore wonder why people think there has been some improvement in the human rights situation. A western diplomat said about the Tepi massacre: "It is unique in Ethiopia's history that the government allowed a foreign mission to make an independent investigation". Before the mission handed in its report, the government had arrested and dismissed some officials.

Merera Gudina of the ONC says why he thinks he can be so open in his criticism: "It is because Ethiopia has become a donors' democracy. Those of us who are known by donors are relatively free. The leadership of an opposition group is often safe but the support base is being harassed." Mrs Majitu of the Hundee organisation also sees a slight improvement: "In some villages the women have put a stop to the old custom. Elders have admitted that abduction is not part of Oromo tradition. In those villages the number of abductions is decreasing."

### Ethnic federalism

Ethiopia has 76 ethnic groups speaking some 280 languages and dialects. The Oromo have considered themselves underdogs since their subjugation by King Menelik II in the nineteenth century. They regard the Amhara, the second largest group, and Tigrayans, the fifth largest group, as dominant. These two have delivered most rulers to the country. Under Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu, Ethiopians were encouraged to adjust to the language and culture of the dominant Amhara. Many ethnic groups however felt discriminated against.

The new government has opted for a new policy called ethnic federalism, which was set out in the 1995 constitution.

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia consists of nine autonomous regions. The regions have been defined roughly along linguistic lines and economic and political power has been decentralised. Each region has its own parliament, president and limited budget. The constitution even allows for secession of individual regions or nationalities. Some major ethnic groups, for example Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromo and Somali, now have their own regions. Four regions are conglomerates of various ethnic groups, and it is here that most problems arise.

Reactions to this ethnic federalism have been mixed. The Tigrayans are satisfied; they are at the centre of power. Many Oromo, Somali, Afar and other groups, which were not and still are not powerful in Ethiopia, have appreciated the government's decision too. Others oppose ethnic federalism. The Amhara are the most outspoken. Many of them had lived for decades as government officials or landowners in areas now assigned to other ethnic groups. They were forced to migrate to their own region and often lost property.

Other Ethiopians, who do not bother so much about their ethnic identity, were simply confused. "My father is Amhara, my mother Oromo, and the woman I have married is Eritrean. I was born and bred in an Oromo area. I am an Ethiopian, but they wanted me to move to the Amhara region where I do not know anyone." The man who told me this story is well educated, but has ended up in Addis Ababa doing unskilled jobs.

Others say the government has used ethnic federalism to favour the less than four million Tigray. Many higher officials in non-Tigray regions come from Tigray. State Minister for Finance and Economic Development, Mulu Ketsela, disagrees with this criticism. "In many regions there is a lack of local qualified administrators or of people loyal to the government's policies," she says.

According to one study, companies controlled by or associated with the ruling party play a dominant role in the economy. Merera Gudina claims that "the classic state-controlled economy has been translated into a party-controlled economy". He and others argue that genuinely private companies such as Ethiopian Amalgamated Fertiliser Company were forced out of business. People close to the ruling party deny strong links between their party and business.

It is difficult to reach a conclusion about the government's handling of poverty, multi-ethnicity and the culture of intolerance, or to assess the extent of exclusion and national cohesion. The implementation of all the government's good intentions

remains weak, especially in distant places and in multi-ethnic areas. It has to break with a culture of intolerance and hierarchical thinking, shaped under the feudal Emperor Haile Selassie and the military Mengistu Haile Mariam. That cannot be done overnight. Shortage of qualified people is a serious problem and the debate about how to deal with the country's multi-ethnicity is far from over. ■

Oromo women meeting with Hundee facilitator

