

TOPIC BRIEF

The Constitution doesn't Reinforce the Formation of one Political Community

November 2023

Nationalist rhetoric treats nations as 'units of membership for persons who are equivalent in their common relation to the whole'. The prevailing question here is however, does belonging to this 'Community' necessarily equate to sharing of similar cultural styles leading to 'cultural conformity' at a national scale?

Historically, nationalism emerged alongside modern states in a bid to acquire understanding of the 'match' between people and state. Theorists supporting such political discourse assert that nationalism births a political community characterized by appreciation of identity and differences. Similar to individualism where personal identities are advanced, they argue that nationalism purports the establishment of internally unified nations *with* uniquely distinct histories. Hence, according to them, the discourse recognizes individual opinion as well as group identity - away from 'pre-established cultural commonality', but subject to rational-critical discussion in the formation of a political community. Considering multiplicities of identities however, one cannot out rule possibility of overlap in the understanding of belongingness to certain commonalties that ultimately leads to cultural similarity growing out of the discourse on differences.



Despite these assertions, nationalism is considered inherently conservative and characterized by standardization and elimination of differences. Often, theorists celebrating differences resist the

notion on grounds that it serves to propagate uniformity. Similarly, arguments in support of multiculturalism forward that ‘people naturally feel at home in *one* culture that is either smaller than a nation state or cuts across the boundaries of nation states’.

They further stipulate that, we – as individuals, are comfortable with particular ways of expressing ourselves different from others while maintaining sameness (or identification) with ‘people like us’. Hence, the particular ways in which we feel different from others is enjoyed as a form of identity. Therefore, for them, one of the unsettling things about entering new cultural context is that people not only lose familiar identifications, they tend to abandon familiar differentiations. And when that occurs, personal identity is lost as one discovers that the ‘cultural cues that locate one’s distinctive differences no longer operate’. Surely citizens’ ability to take part in and shape the decisions that affect their lives is best developed through political participation. Among others, political debates and participations extensively present not only the opportunity to express individual opinions but also to organize and shape collective affairs. Undoubtedly, it is on such occasions that cultures are not only transmitted or reproduced but also, new cultures are made and even identities created or changed. Thus, rather than taking for granted points of agreement and disagreement simply by belonging to a certain community, people are furnished with a choice of thoughts by participating in rational-critical debates that unfold on such occasions.

The question is therefore, what has the FDRE Constitution achieved thus far in terms of cultivating a shared sense of belongingness as a nation while equally appreciating differences? The society the Constitution has envisioned is clearly one where people of different cultures can live together peaceably and to mutual benefit within the same country. However, with a deeply entrenched categorization of individuals as members of certain groups of society- whether there exists multiple or overlapping or shifting of patterns of identity – there is the inevitable promotion of differences as opposed commonalities that applaud similarities in differences; or make or remake new identities through public deliberations.

Proponents argue that the sustained creation of public space where not only diversity is appreciated but also cultural creativity towards the formation of one political community is advanced is yet to be appreciated under the Ethiopian Constitution. According to them, the issue is even more persistent now as we, as a society, continue to find ourselves in a situation where some identities are more powerful over others thus perpetuating ever enduring identity struggles as opposed to the peaceful co-existence aspired. *Source- [European Journal of Social Theory 2\(2\):217 231 Nationalism, Political Community and the Representation of Society, by Craig Calhoun, New York University, 1999](#)*

The debate on the topic was organized by DHLO in partnership with USAID/OTI ESP. *Habegar Debates* hosted the event **25th November, 2023 in Addis Ababa** between *Ato G/Giorgis Gidey* and *Ato Abenezer Tiruayehu* with *Liya Terefe* moderating.

Here is the link to the full debate video.

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