

The Role of Non Governmental Organizations in the Democratization Process of Ethiopia, A Historical Survey

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Abstract: *International NGOs deep rooted in Ethiopia during the 1973-74 and 1984-85 catastrophic famine. During the Imperial (1930-1974) and Derg (1974-1991) regimes, NGOs were not allowed to participate in the democratization process of the country because of the restrictive laws and policies of the then governments on the non-state actors. As a result, NGOs during the time were mainly involved in relief activities under the close supervision of the governments. After 1991 the number and activity of national and international NGOs on the development and democratic building of the country has been increased. This is mainly because of the policies and laws on NGOs were somewhat better than the Imperial and Derg times. But after the 2005 election because of different factors the relationship between NGOs and government reach at its fronting point. As a result, government issued the 2009 charities and societies proclamations, which restrict foreign and foreign based NGOs in Ethiopia from involving on advocacy of Human right and Democracy.*

Keywords: Democracy, Justice, Inequality, Derg and NGOs

The central point of this study is to examine the role of NGOs in the democratization process of Ethiopia. Most of the time NGOs are called by variety of names: The voluntary sector, civil society, non-governmental or non-profit organizations, non-state actors, charities, or private voluntary organizations. [1] They are mostly involved in emergency response, democratic building, conflict resolution, human rights work, cultural preservation, environmental activism, policy analysis and research, and information provision. [2]

For the sustainable development of a certain country, the existence of a free and democratic society and the unbiased distribution and transfer of power with the active participation of the people is very significant. [3] So, the improvement of human condition, the promotion of human rights issues or the alleviation of economic problems, can only be achieved with the participation of people who join together with common interest through NGOs, because NGOs provide important information on public opinion and on the effect of policy decisions. [4]

In Ethiopia the development of NGOs pass three phases: in the first phase NGOs in the country totally involved in the relief and humanitarian work. [5] During this phase, NGOs in Ethiopia engaged in providing services such as nutrition, clothing, shelter, primary health care, education, transpiration and water supply. Most relief NGOs were deep rooted in the country during the 1974-75 and 1984-85 famine. [6] The 2nd phase is the de-linking of relief and humanitarian work or a phase of rehabilitation provision. During the rehabilitation phase in addition to their relief work NGOs began to involve in soil conservation and a forestation activities. [7]

In the third phase NGOs in the country try to engage in governance, advocacy of human rights and rule of law, observance of rights of people. [8] which has significant value for the democratization process of the country.

Until 1991, the legal and political environment in Ethiopia were not as such conducive for the active participation of NGOs in the democratization and development activity of the country mainly due to the Imperial (1930-1974) and Derg (1974 – 1991) restrictive and oppressive regulations and laws. [9] Currently in Ethiopia NGOs are mainly involved in addressing the root cause of poverty and supporting different institutions of the country to establish good governance and democratic administrative system. [10]

In general, the active participation of NGOs has its own significance in the overall development activity of Ethiopia mainly by improving the lives of the poor and disadvantaged groups in providing basic services. On the other hand, NGOs have their own role on the country's economy and development programs; on the process of democracy building, access to justice and good governance; on public awareness and empowerment; on the development of government official's capacity up to district and *kebele* levels. [11]

Establishing a voluntary organization is not a new phenomenon in Ethiopia because beginning from time immemorial until today there are a number of self help voluntary organizations in the country. These organizations are mostly established based on religious, social, locality or kinship criteria. For instance, *Debo* which is a voluntary organization for labor; *Idir* is a social organization to support each other during the time of emergency; *Mehaber* and *Senbete* are association for religious purpose. [12]. Currently in Ethiopia there is more than 199,000 people's organization which shows the rich associational life of Ethiopian society. [13] But, the role of these local based voluntary organizations in the democratization process of the country was and is insignificant. [14]

Prior to the 1970's and 1980's famine of Ethiopia there were missionary or faith based NGOs in Ethiopia which were engaged in supporting vulnerable groups such as disabled, orphans, aged people and the poor. [15] They mainly gave relief aid to those vulnerable groups rather than

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engaging in rehabilitation and development activities. Among these: The Ethiopian red cross (1935), the Ethiopian evangelical church Mekane Yesus (1960), and the Chesire foundation (1969) were the well known NGOs which engaged in providing relief aid during the then period. [16]

During the Imperial (1930-1974) and Derg (1974-1991) regime the number and role of NGOs were very limited in the democratization and development activity of the country because the government of Hile Sellassie I and Derg were not willing to see independent non-state organizations in Ethiopia. [17] Even those existed were allowed to participate in the relief activity under close supervision of the governments. [18]

Moreover, the legal and political condition in Ethiopia during the imperial and Derg period did not allow NGOs to involve in the advocacy of rule of law and democratic building. However, the Ethiopian student movement played significant role in protesting and resisting the imperial regime in 1950's and 1960's which can be taken as a good initiation for the democratization process of the country. [19] The involvement of NGOs in governance, human right and advocacy activity was prohibited until the coming to power of EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) in 1991. [20]

The NGO sector deep rooted and began active involvement in Ethiopia since the 1973-74 famine. As a result of the famine, unusually the emperor was forced to open his door to the local and international NGOs mainly to undertake relief aid. [21] The equally catastrophic famine of 1984-85 also has its own role for the intensification of NGOs in the country. At the beginning like the Imperial government Derg allowed NGOs to involve only in relief activities. Though they were expected to accomplish their activity in conformity with the policy which we set by the government NGOs were shifted from relief and rehabilitation work to development activities. [22]

Following the down fall of Derg and the coming to power of EPRDF, NGOs in the country shows development not only numerically but also there was some sort of liberalization. In the same fashion, NGOs began to participate in different parts of the country. Some of their contribution includes: democratic building; creating awareness in different sections of the society regarding human and democratic rights, rule of law, equality, popular participation etc, which were not allowed to advocate before. [23]

NGOs progress and activity in Ethiopia was unsatisfactory before 1991 mainly because of the power centralization history of the country. In addition, government considers the NGO sector as partisan and political opponents than ally for development. So, to restrict the involvement of NGOs in the development activity such as; Human rights, Rule of law, Equality and the like the law and policies of the then governments were restrictive, which did not leave space for NGOs to involve beyond relief services. [24] As a result, NGOs in the country fended to retreat away from issues which considered as political that disappoint the government. [25]

However, since 1991 there is some degree of political liberalization and the political space for the non-state actors are opening up. As a result, the number and activity of NGOs in the country shows development. And NGOs began to involve in political and economic renaissance of the country. [26] On the top of this, in the post 1991 period NGOs are not limited to involve only on relief and rehabilitation activities but also began to involve in human rights, governance and advocacy programs, voter education, public policy evaluation and monitoring activities etc. [27] The building of democratic political culture is not an easy task which can be accomplished within a single night by government alone. Rather, it is a gradual process which needs the participation of different actors like NGOs, the state and society. With the existence of these all things, Ethiopia shows significant progress in the development of Democratic political culture especially after 1991. [28]

Particularly the NGO sector is playing pivotal role in the democratization process of Ethiopia by creating awareness on citizens regarding the significance of people's participation in areas like right issues, democracy, good governance, corruption, access to Justice, voter education, etc. [29] On the top of this, NGOs in the country are monitoring democratic processes, rule of law, violations of rights and promoting fair and democratic election. [30]

Moreover, they try to improve the capacity and efficiency of democratic institutions through training, workshops, and experience sharing forums [31]. For instance, from 2005-2009 an NGO called Justice for all and prison fellowship – Ethiopia (JFAPFE) played significant role in the democratization process of the country by giving training on human rights, justice, democracy, good governance to 9,206 justice officials, decision makers, policy producers including parliament representatives mainly aiming to improve their capacity in building democracy in their areas of work. [32] In addition, leadership training was given to 600 top government officials in order to improve their ability of administration which has significant values for the democratization process of the country [33].

In addition to training, workshops, and experience sharing forums, NGOs in the country try to build democracy through publication and dissemination of materials which has significant values to create awareness on the society; by distributing the legal documents of the country including the 1995 FDRE constitution; by educating the different section of the society about the importance of peoples participation in different affairs of their country including election; by arranging public debates and workshop on human right and other issues; by arranging radio program about good governance and human right issues. [34]

In addition, in order to reach each and every section of the society NGOs in the Ethiopia try to involve in *Idir* and other community based non-state actors in human right and governance issues. [35] Moreover, NGOs in the country try to arrange National level dialogue forums which particularly focus on democratization, federalism, consensus building, religious tolerance, leadership and management by involving government officials, religious leaders, diplomats, ambassadors, and government officials. [36] Besides, they

try to distribute human right training materials to the different sections of the society to improve the awareness of the people which has significant values for the democratization process of the country [37].

NGOs in Ethiopia played significant role for the initial establishment of school clubs in the areas of harmful traditional practices, child rights, violence against girls, corporal punishment and the like are issues which were later accepted as a co-curricular activity at school. Moreover, NGOs like Action Net work for Prevention against Child Abuse and Neglect in Ethiopia (ANPACNE), and Mary Joy are the figurehead in initiating and supporting the establishment of children's parliaments and children's council in the country which helps the new generation to train democracy. [38]

On the other hand, NGOs in Ethiopia try to influence government to introduce pro-poor policies and they promote the need and interests of the disadvantaged, voiceless and marginalized groups through research and advocacy, which empower these groups to involve in the decision making activity of the country. [39]

Despite the constitutional recognition of equal access to justice, most people are not in a opposition to enjoy this right sufficiently in Ethiopia because of lack of equality in legal service. And to alleviate this horrible condition NGOs in the country engaged in giving legal aid service for those vulnerable groups. For instance, EWLA (Ethiopian Women's Lawyer Association) is playing pivotal role in giving legal aid service for those poor women who are victim of gender based violence, which increases women's access to justice. [40] So, from this we can understand that NGOs are playing important role by filling the gap on the areas which government could not reach in the democratization process of the country.

Before 1991, the legal and political conditions in Ethiopia were not conducive for the involvement of NGOs in the promotion of human right, rule of law, good governance, and democratic building. This was mainly because of misconception of government and its policy on the NGOs sector. [41] On the top of this, lack of public support, government interferences and the poor institutional establishment of NGOs are also the most common problem and challenges of NGOs in Ethiopia in the development of democratic political culture [42].

Sometimes because of the misunderstanding of government and government officials regarding NGOs activity and its role on the democratic building of the country there was intimidation and arresting of NGO officials, mainly suspecting and associating their involvement as political agitation. For instance, after the 2005 election a number of NGO leaders were accused and criminalized by government claiming their involvement in patrician politics, supporting the opposition parties. [43] This accusation of NGO senior officials might have its own negative impact on the role of NGOs in the democratization process of the country.

On the other hand, the 2005 charities and society proclamation No 621/2009 allowed only Ethiopian NGOs to

involve on the advocacy of human and democratic right; promotion of right of disable and other vulnerable groups; promotion of equality of nations, nationalities and peoples and that of gender and religion have its own negative impact on those foreign NGOs and Ethiopia Resident foreign NGOs to involve on issues of human right [44].

Beside, the proclamation affected those Ethiopian NGOs that engaged on the above activity mobilizing ninety per cent of their income from foreign aid. Because the proclamation allowed Ethiopian NGOs to involve on the advocacy of human right, religious equality, promotion of right of disable but they are expected to generate ninety per cent of their income from inside which is very challenging for them because of the little social tradition of most Ethiopian to give funds to NGOs. [45] As a result, some NGOs are closed because of lack of capital to run their organization.

The historical centralized administrative system of Ethiopia affected the intensification of NGOs and its interaction with the government. This was mainly because of the poor understanding of the government on NGOs, as a result NGOs were considered as potential enemy or opponents of government power and administration. [46] Because of this dynamics the number of NGOs in the country before 1991 was very limited and those existed were concentrated in the capital, Addis Ababa, while giving relief aid [47].

This misunderstanding on NGOs remains underdeveloped somewhat in the current era of relative political liberalization. [48] Despite the number of NGOs in Ethiopia increased, after 1991 their relationship with the government was not smooth. [49] For instance, in September 21, the ministry of justice accused EWLA when they criticize it in public for not taking action on individuals who are accused of women's right violation [50].

On the other hand, the active participation of NGOs in the 2005 election pushes the conflict between NGOs and the government to its peak. In response the government has arrested some NGO leaders calming their participation in patrician politics. In addition, the government issued the oppressive charities and society's proclamation in 2009, which restrict foreign and foreign based NGOs in Ethiopia from involving in advocacy activity like human right. And reserved the advocacy activity only for Ethiopian NGOs which can generate more than ninety percent of their income from inside [51].

Some of the most important factors that pushed down the relationship between NGOs and government were: The protest which NGOs show against the emergency law that was issued by government following the 2005 election; governments intention to protect local NGOs from involving as observer during the election and the response of NGOs; the opposition that government faced in handling of the post election crisis; and governments claim in NGOs participation in patrician politics [52]. This deteriorated relationship and interaction between NGOs and government might have its own negative impact on the democratic building role of NGOs in the country.

NGOs activity and involvement in different parts of Ethiopia lacks accuracy and certainty. There were/are unethical and corrupt NGOs which always run behind their benefit under the banner of supporting the vulnerable groups, advocating human right and the like. These “bogus” NGOs which gave priority for their private interest affect the whole NGO sector in the country by eroding the trust of government and donors on different sectors [53].

The other significant problem is NGOs engagement beyond their mandate. As it is known NGOs are non partisan, non profit, and non political organization established by voluntary groups. [54] But in Ethiopia, there are circumstances that NGOs engaged in partisan politics which is out of the ethics of NGOs [55].

Some of the most important factor that push NGOs to involve in partisan politics are: the availability of fund on the area; lack of transparency on the NGOs sector regarding their source of income and activity; some NGOs are established with hidden interests and the gap which was existed in the previous Ethiopian law regarding monitoring and evaluation of NGOs in the country [56].

Notes

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- [26] *Ibid*, p.1.
- [27] Dessalegn Rahmato, Yoseph Endeshaw and *etal*, “CSOs/NGOs in Ethiopia partners in Development and good governance” (Addis Abeba, 2008), p.12.
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- [29] Dessalegn Rahmato, Yoseph Endeshaw and *etal* “CSOs/NGOs in Ethiopia partners in Development and good governance” (Addis Abeba, 2008), p.7.
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- [33] *Ibid*.
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- [39] *Ibid*,p.67.
- [40] Sisay Gerber-Egziabher, “The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Democratization process in Ethiopia (University of Cape Town, 2002), p.13.
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