“The Developmental State and Federalism in Ethiopia”: Critique of Professor Clapham

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Recently, I shared my brief outline of a monograph with colleagues and friends across domestic and foreign universities. The note focuses on what specifically two political developments presently in Ethiopia mean to political science and political sociology. The first is the incidence of aroused agitation among Ethiopian Muslims juxtaposed by supporters of opposition parties coming out to streets and, the second, manners of power successions among the ranks of the ruling party against the principles and practices of the developmental state. I realized from the various feedbacks, comments, and questions particularly that two key cardinal points in the monograph generated a degree of academic interest, leaving sensational and partisan reflections aside-cultural diversity versus the developmental state. Slowly, the overall focus shifted to these ises.

Most of the questions, which are my serious concern here, gravitated toward two themes. I may generalize the first as what the several jargons dominating the monograph clearly meant while the second revolved around the need for clarifying the link between theories/approaches with the said political developments in Ethiopia. In specific terms, many friends of the first question category asked me what ethno-linguistic and religious diversity means and implies to the developmental state versus the liberal state, in general. These friends raised concern how I explained the causes, scopes, management mechanisms, and possible consequences of the Muslim agitation in Ethiopia. The second question tended to focus on the theoretical and practical consistencies between the liberal principles of pluralism and behavior of the Ethiopian government as a developmental state.

1. The Crux of the Matter

In the mean time, however, a colleague from Mekelle University challenged some of my arguments by citing Professor Clapham’s (a veteran Ethiopianist scholar) recent public speech in Mekelle and Addis Ababa as a major source. I soon searched for the printed copy of the speech and found it at the English Reporter. The Reporter understood Clapham as saying centrally: ‘cultural homogeneity and the developmental state are so coextensive that the former is a natural prerequisite for the latter.’ If I am not mistaken, I, in my turn, understood this statement to mean that the ‘developmental state is essentially an institution, difficult, if not, impossible if a society is culturally diverse.

This argument appears to have gotten its origins from the observation that most of the Asian countries conventionally dubbed as ‘developmental’ are generally homogenous societies ethno-linguistically and religiously. Having accepted this argument as plausible and most relevant to explain present Ethiopia, another colleague from Adama University came up with a critical view. For this colleague, as I interpreted his statements written in Amharic-mixed English, the Clapham ‘contradiction’ between the developmental state and ethno-religious diversity is the more likely explanation for the existing Muslim agitation and many other set backs bubbling up with a potential threat against the state
itself. From this, he directly progressed to suggest the alternative course of state policy that it should embrace liberalism as the ‘true panacea’.

I also received a comment from South Africa, Pretoria, by another friend who described and equated the meaning of the ‘developmental state’ thesis with the post-Soviet revision of Marxism-Leninism. For this friend, the majority of South African blacks and the white minority, who were bitter enemies before 20 years, have learned now to live together peacefully thanks to liberalism. He raised the recent Muslim agitations in Ethiopia, a country of Muslim-Christian *modus Vivendi* for more than 13 centuries, is an evidence for the fact that the ‘developmental state’ is incapable to insure what he called a ‘secular peace.’ This friend, a lawyer by profession, cited Professor Clapham as correctly identifying the origins of the policy crisis.

I learnt from the arguments in the negative side, of course, there have been some appreciable grains of truth in the evaluation of the socio-cultural structures of most developmental states. On the issue of congruity between ethno-cultural homogeneity and the developmental state, it is true that dominant cultural homogeneity characterizes South Korea, China, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Indonesia, to mention the major ones. Their majority societies share similar languages and religious codes. It is also true that most, if not all, developmental states are strongly centralized unitary arrangements. Historically and politically, regimes and successive governments in these states have borne the conspicuous traditional marks of heavy temptations toward authoritarianism, or in the words of Samuel Huntington, ‘legacies of oriental despotism’ as a shared behavior.

It is against this background, that I tried to read professor Clapham and his ‘contradiction’ thesis.

One may readily agree with any argument that Ethiopia stands probably as the sole developmental state characteristically marked by ethno-linguistic and cultural diversities. This undoubtedly produced the existing federation as a response to the long-standing intercultural schism distinguishing the country from others. In the mean time, the government came up with the developmental state approach. This political development for Clapham has been an odd one because while he understands the developmental state as a centralizing process possible in homogenous states, federalism, as a decentralizing process--its direct contrast organically inconsistent. In other words, the natural combination is right when federalism comes together with liberalism (Clapham is silent about this point) while the developmental state chains itself with strong centralism.

It is true that federalism in Ethiopia signifies, crudely speaking, the increased disengagement of the state from the monopolistic control of cultural diversities. Contrarily, the developmental state represents the increased engagements of the state in its roles of economic management and development. These two engagements apparently follow diverging courses with still apparently little or no common point of convergence in the middle. I feel that Professor Clapham has traveled the safe journey of comparative analysis up to this point before coming face to face with the Devil in the details. To begin with, why did the ruling party adopt ;the developmental state thesis as a development approach in Ethiopia?

2. Clapham and ‘the Four Reasons’

Now let us see how Clapham identifies what he calls the ‘four major reasons for the introduction of the developmental state in Ethiopia’. He lists the Ethio-Eritrean war, 1998-
2000 that flared up the wide sense of unity among Ethiopians, the split within the ruling party EPRDF, 2001, the dismal outcome of election 2005, and finally the personal character of the former Prime Minister, Mêlées Zenawi.

I could not but list four problems fettering sound analysis in professor Clapham’s description.

Firstly, the gateway challenge starts from the methodology and terms used by Clapham. What is the difference, for example, between ‘reasons’ and ‘factors’, ‘rationales’, and ‘justifications,’ etc, in their English usage? To make the point clear, I could not understand what kind of questions the ‘four reasons’ by Clapham should answer. Let me raise three questions, for example. What factors did convince the ruling party or, Mêlés, its chairperson, to choose specifically 2002 to make a policy twist toward the developmental state by dropping their former ideology? Obviously, the answer for this question could never meet another question category: what justifications did the ruling party have to introduce the developmental state approach into Ethiopia? This question again scarcely answers a third question: what are the rationales behind the policy preference for the developmental state and for believing it fits Ethiopia’s realities? Obviously, Clapham’s ‘four reasons’ would best satisfy if the question were the first one above, that is, albeit, only the tip of the iceberg from methodological points of view.

Even so, one can see that Clapham hardly synthesizes events into the background logic of policy twists in the appropriate way to serve his aim of listing his ‘four reasons’, which should have been, I argue, ‘temporal factors’. Why? Contrary to Clapham’s time parcels, the ruling party, for example, already started practicing the developmental state approach during election 2005, (just three years before). Of course, the bad election outcome might add pressures on the ruling party to speed up earnestly its velocity of causing development in order to change the then negative mood to its advantages. This reasoning however never helps one to pick the election result for EPRDF and Meles to design the developmental state thesis in retrospective fashion.

Clapham’s mention of the Eritrean invasion within the same ‘reason basket’ for adopting the developmental state model is again puzzling. The contradiction in his reasoning is this: He attributed, on the one hand, the change of mind on the part of the ruling party since 2001 to embrace developmentalism as a response to the popular nationalist arousal against Eritrea. By this, Clapham made the ‘developmental state agenda’ a corrective step by Mêlés where he emphasized wrongly on diversities more than unity. On the other hand, Clapham notes that the new federal design was welcome news for much of western and southern Ethiopia. The question here is: which one is the cause and which one is the effect for the nationalist arousal, the federal design that caused a ‘new revolutionary sense of unity’, in his own word, or ‘the doubt by the Ethiopian people over federalism?’ The story does not end here. Midst these, what logical link was there between the developmental state and the Ethiopian nationalist arousal against Eritrea’s invasion? Does it mean that Mêlés adopted the developmental state approach when he saw that it was possible to practice it because the popular arousal showed him that Ethiopians are one and heeding little for his federal project, or did he consider it as a compensation? Only Clapham knows the answer.

Clapham also made another serious mistake by treating his ‘four reasons’ as major agents, one disconnected from the other. He failed to appreciate that the ‘four reasons’ were a composite of factors borne out of a distinct political development within a particular period of Mêlés’s rule but with deep-rooted background explanations. In my
view, Clapham would have come closer to the correct historiography if he saw the matter as follows:

It was not a secret at the time that the way Mêlés handled the Eritrean war caused divisions within the ranks of TPLF. In the bitter course of power struggle that ensued, Mêlés emerged victorious. This unquestionably brought him with two advantages. One was that the Eritrean defeat extricated him of the excessive engagement in the war effort, a respite to turn his face to the development agenda. The second was that the consequent purge of his former Marxist hardliner comrades out of TPLF left him with a free hand to undertake a policy U-turn toward the liberalized thesis of the developmental state. After the reform, Mêlés opened up a democratic venue for election 2005, before the policy change bore fruits. This induced a shocking outcome for his party. At this time of crisis, Mêlés’s personal character was important to keep the locomotives of the developmental state rolling ahead until the Ethiopian people noticed the unprecedented economic change.

Unfortunately, Professor Clapham put the cart before the horse. This impaired his former outstanding insight into Ethiopia’s politics on this particular agenda. Once he made these mistakes at the entry point of his discussion, then, this affected the rest of his arguments at the substantive level.

3. The ‘Clapham Contradiction’?

At the sustentative level, ‘Clapham’s contradiction’, as implied above, strongly affirms that the very nature of the ‘developmental state is incompatible with the rationales of the federal system. His argument runs as follows:

Since in all of the original Asian cases, from which the ideas of developmental state arose, they had powerful cultural bases, which could be called up on to, mobilize a resource, a form of enthusiasm, a sense of social discipline behind the developmental project itself. And to add to that the Ethiopian government had itself until that moment actually encouraged and institutionalized its own internal diversities.

Despite this, Clapham mentions Mêlés to tell us how he defended the compatibility between federalism and the developmental state. Clapham notes, Mêlés argued that the developmental state went operational in Ethiopia within the federal framework and without disturbing the rights of localities to apply the principle in line with their respective unique realities. Nonetheless, Clapham did not point out in what capacity, (as a Prime Minister or as a scholar?) Mêlés said this. In apparent rejection of this, Clapham describes the practical incompatibility between the two models in Ethiopia’s context as follows:

And such a state (the developmental state) can scarcely operate without taking into its own hand areas of competence notable amongst which, especially in agrarian state, has to be the control and allocation of land which almost any federal structure, let alone one constitutionally devolved as Ethiopia, must leave to the discretion of its individual units. The Ethiopian federal system was introduced as a response to the very distinctive and discriminatory historical legacy of Ethiopian statehood. And it was replaced by a new one, which was once again centralized under the hands of a central government reviving the very problems that the structure of the federalism had been designed to resolve in the first place.
To comprehend Clapham’s views further, we have to recite his generalized notions of the developmental state versus federalism, which one can find in his speech. Firstly, what the approach called ‘developmental state’ for him is an ‘ideology’ comparable probably with Marxism-Leninism, Soviet-Communism, or liberalism. Secondly, as the above quotation from Clapham’s speech clearly tells us, the developmental state is a direct replacement of federalism so that the two are mutually exclusive projects. The introduction of developmental state into Ethiopia is a case in point for him. Thirdly, Clapham argues that the basic rationales that have allowed the developmental state model to be effective in Asia are scarce in Ethiopia where he doubts whether the Ethiopian model could address the country’s problems. Fourthly, Clapham draws a compatibility curve between the management of land through what he calls ‘individual units’ as a standard federal practice elsewhere whereas its state ownership in Ethiopia favors neither the developmental state nor federalism.

To my understanding, Clapham almost wholly argues in a manner that, I believe, obscures the theoretical and empirical threads that knit the developmental state with federalism. This limitation possibly results from his understanding of the developmental state thesis as a rigid ideological stance. However, Clapham immediately swerves to assert that the developmental state demands a specific situation for its applications like those of Asian states and structures. The question is: if the developmental state is an ideology, why does Clapham specify background preconditions for its introduction into Ethiopia? This limitation, I saw, led him, to ignore the obvious fact that the developmental state argument has stood as an immediate preference by most Asian states for its high-level pragmatism. I am not sure whether Clapham will argue that ‘pragmatism’ itself is an ideology.

On this score, I definitely agree with Mêlés’s reasoning that the developmental state has nothing inherently contradictory to the mechanics of federalism where it adapts itself to the needs of decentralized governance. It was never the developmental state practice that absorbs federalism but the vice versa. I know this is not a simple argument to substantiate with evidences by easily demonstrating the actual physiological process of the two projects. However, I argue again that there are some fundamental reasons that run against the Clapham ‘contradiction thesis.’

As Clapham himself rightly points out, federalism is a project designed to address historically entrenched social conflicts in Ethiopia emboldened by the discriminatory process of state building. In explicit terms, the advent of federalism was and is the response to the massive call of its cultural and political consumers, who found themselves denied it for a century, at least. This logically implies that there are a good majority of social groups supplying the structural basement of federalism in Ethiopia. Who are these social groups? I agree with Clapham again that these groups include the multiple ethno-cultural and religious groups in western and eastern Ethiopia exempting highlander, Amharic speaking Orthodox Christians from the list. However, Clapham misses the fact that this exemption is relative in the sense that it is mainly cultural where the cultural identity of rulers during the process of state formation overlapped or hosted itself within the Amhara nation. Ironically, the culturally advantaged Amhara nation lost the advantages of economics. Arithmetically speaking, the cultural discrimination laid the majority of Ethiopian social groups victims while the economic oppression targeted all regardless of ethno-linguistic and religious differences, despite some functional differences.

If this is the socio-cultural map underlying Ethiopia’s federalism, what is its counterpart in the backgrounds of the developmental state? I agree again with Clapham that the urgent
demand for rapid socio-economic development in Ethiopia is the socio-cultural parallel of the developmental state. This nails the sociological and economic fact that both federalism and the developmental state necessarily base themselves on a wide and working social coalition. It would be a gross dialectical flaw to imagine such gargantuan projects to materialize without adequate and corresponding social coalitions at their backgrounds. While federalism forges this coalition with the vast majority of ethno-linguistic and religious groups, the developmental state cements it with all economically marginalized and disadvantaged social groups; namely, the agrarian rural peasants, pastoralists and the urban poor who are at the same time ethno-culturally almost all Ethiopian Muslims and Christians. One may infer from this is that the big majority of social groups in the coalition for federalism and the developmental state are largely one and the same. It is the precise point where I diverge with Clapham. Unfortunately, he diagnoses both federalism and the developmental state projects just from above in separation of their social foundations on which they insure their entire operations and future continuities.

One should be careful here at examining the iron of principle of social coalition constructing the essences of the developmental state. It does not mean a policy of top down social inclusion or exclusion of groups. It rather implies a degree of preferential treatments by the state and policy priorities in the allocation of scarce national resources as per their social standing and demands of these social groups. Here again, Clapham can be sure that target social groups of federalism versus the developmental state unmistakably converge. In the resulting mechanics in tandem, the cultural opportunity opened up by federalism picks readily an economic equivalent by the developmental state through mutual reinforcements without one undermining the other. In other words, the developmental state is an intersection point between cultural empowerment through the excise of federalism and state-led socioeconomic growth.

Moreover, the pragmatic nature of the developmental state supplies the government with the lubricant interface between the diverging courses of centralization and decentralization. The background rationale is that the developmental state, unlike what Clapham asserts as a mere centralizing process, means largely an ‘increased role of the state’ in economic management necessitated by the logic of agrarian economy and the resultant challenge of structural market failure,. and never a replacement of private property and individual economic initiative. The developmental state limits itself to the grand project of generous growth support at household level through the decentralized state machinery, which again decidedly resolves the apparent Clapham’s ‘contradiction.’

Where is then the contradiction between this top down support extended by local administrations from economic points of view within a national development framework and decentralized forms of governance? Where does an elevated state involvement in development undermine cultural rights guaranteed by the federal system? Clapham appears to have obscured the possible affirmative answer for these questions by inserting a vague term or concept, which he calls ‘individual units’ as administrators of land in a standard federal order. What does ‘individual unit’ mean? Does it mean members of the federation or individual households? If Clapham refers to the former, then, he must show the basic divergence with that of Ethiopia’s practice. If he however implies to the latter, then, he must mean that both the developmental state and federalism contradict with state ownership of land.

Clapham furthermore doubts the compatibility of the developmental state and federalism in Ethiopia’s reality also for structural reasons by comparing the permissive background conditions available in Asian states but lacking in Ethiopia. By this, I am seriously afraid
that he might allude to distinctions by classical Anthropologists of the 19th century at Euro-American universities between what they called ‘high cultures’ and ‘low cultures’... Hoping that he means something else, still Clapham’s way of linking enabling situations at the backgrounds of the developmental state to its potential for rapid development erroneously concludes that Ethiopia may fail to erect the basics of such a state. If they lack here, so, does it mean, that the developmental state is a fiasco project dead before birth, and fruitless starting it?

Well, this conclusion is acceptable at face value but if one could erase two cardinal and integral attributes of the developmental state thesis from the rubrics. First, the developmental state is a living structure that functions consciously to bring what the free market can never do so by itself; second, the developmental state bears organically within itself friendly catalysts that the state deliberately designs and applies to achieve stated goals, just from above. In other words, the developmental state is not only a positivist notion in itself but also a normative project, destined by self-tasked mission to insure rapid development through and along side with changing grim the socio-cultural and socio-economic statuesque. It appears to be arbitrary how Clapham makes a link between what he calls the favorable cultural backgrounds in the developmental states of Asia with the policy-led project of socio-economic transformation. Assuming that he is correct, does he mean that the developmental state is a teleological growth, given these permissive cultural factors on the ground? If so, what is the logical explanation to call such a state ‘developmental’ in the absence of formidable and all-pervasive predicaments? How could Clapham explain the unbelievable myriad of cultural diversities among the Asian developmental states within and without? I do not know.

The Asia-centric understanding of the developmental state by Clapham also made him pay another methodological price. To the consensus of several development scholars, the African state of Botswana is also at the first list of developmental states in the globe. Contrary to Clapham’s description of favorable cultural factors, Botswana arose from the ashes left by colonization and with populations who were the perfect cultural antithesis of the said Asian developmental states. I also once heard a high-ranking South African Congress official saying that his country structurally staggered to adopt the developmental state model, despite a wide and chronically felt-need to do so for the reason that the 300 years of uniquely brutal foreign rule sufficiently distorted the indigenous socio-cultural and socio-economic structures. By this, he meant the fact of aborted and out-side-in oriented capitalism played the card now bending the free hands of the state to its own advantages. The state could not nationalize land, empower rural populations, and any other structural limitations. From this, one can see how the developmental state proves to be a dynamically self-creating and forward moving institution against deplorable zero-ground starting point under conditions of raw cultures unspoiled by colonization, which brings Ethiopia rather to the side of Asian developmental states.

Finally, Clapham tries to identify another contradiction between the ethno-linguistic bases of Ethiopia’s federalism as a possible barrier to the free movement of capital, trade and market engendered by the practice of the developmental state. This is of course more of a hypothetical projection than an empirically tested conclusion before Ethiopia’s present growth creates the need. However, from historical standpoint, I could not bring any experience where linguistic barriers by policy or otherwise posed unbroken resistance to the dynamic penetration of business and capital forces any where in the world. This unsubstantiated view led Clapham to poorly establish a contradiction between the federal order and the coming of foreign investors in unsettled peripheries of
Ethiopia. Contrary to Clapham’s characterization, the developmental state is never an either-or option tabled to the multicultural people of Ethiopia stated as: ‘choose between your distinct culture and federalism, or your belly and the developmental state. Whom does Clapham in Ethiopia suspect of saying ‘I do not want development but poverty under conditions where cultural rights are in place?

4. So what, if different? Conclusive remarks

At the end of this discussion, there remains a 64 dollar worth question by every one, probably including Clapham.

We saw that Clapham’s arguments suffered some serious methodological and substantive limitations across most arguments above, which, either describe the disease distortedly or prescribe the medicine wrongly. However, this does not mean that Ethiopia’s developmental state is a copy of its Asian counterparts. One can even say the differences abound more than similarities do. **So, what do we call the Ethiopian case?** Simply, we are free to call it, and no other alternative than naming it ‘the Ethiopian brand of the developmental state’. My problem with Clapham is not with the characteristic difference which the Ethiopian federal and developmental state projects structurally have. The problem is Clapham’s gross position, which asserts that if Ethiopia’s case does not fit the Asian prototype, then, it means it is contradictory and probably unworkable.

Comically, Clapham made his public lectures 10 years after the introduction of the developmental state in Ethiopia. Obviously, this should have made the discourse a post-practice dialogue to face the test of empirical evidences, for or against. I could not capture the reason why Clapham did not want to do so particularly to determine whether his ‘contradiction’ is really a matter deserving a serious concern or not. I also could not see the point in his fear of what he calls ‘disproportionate development’ across regional states as a possible consequence of the contradiction between federalism and the developmental state. As any human agency, the developmental state is never a miraculous ‘magic bullet’ that cures all types of social malaises overnight. It, more as a standing rule, starts undertaking its development project at a point of time breaking away with the past. In the entire period before the breakage, the teeth of underdevelopment in the past tragically crushed the vast majority into grotesque bins of sub-humanity while they elevated the few others up to the apex of bizarre prosperity. As the result, the total elimination of the entrenched inequality undoubtedly would take some more time.

In conclusion, almost all the arguments above by Clapham, suffer a pair of logical fallacies. The argument, which searches the causative rationales for the emergence of the developmental state, in general, from cultural homogeneity, painfully suffers from what logicians call the ‘fallacy of false cause.’ In his association of cultural uniformity directly in the organic sense of the term and as a an exclusive rule of political economy with the developmental state and its operations also experiences the ‘fallacy of false association.’ In both cases, the mistaken argument makes the gross ontological and methodological error that it grossly misses the fact that socio-economic underdevelopment and deplorable mass poverty proved to be the very surrogate of the developmental state thesis. Nothing called for the innovative formulation of the ‘developmental state’ view other than the search for the theoretical and empirical roadmap that could decidedly bridge the unbelievable gap in economic advancement between the poor states of the South versus the prosperous West.