

Youth Unemployment Fueled by Ethnic Nationalism in Ethiopia

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Youth unemployment is a socio-economic problem as a result of demographic, social and economic factors. According to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹ The ‘unemployed are people of working age who are without work, are available for work, and have taken specific steps to find work’. IOM² report stated that unemployment includes persons who had no work but were available for work. They may be either seeking work or not seeking /discouraged job seekers. Discouraged job seekers are those unemployed who want a job but are not taking any active steps to search for work because they think a job is not available in the labor market.³ World Bank report (July 26, 2023) indicated that unemployment in Ethiopian cities has already reached 26%, is disproportionally made up of youth with secondary education at best. And, though most Ethiopians currently live in rural areas, the urban population is expected to double—from 20% now to nearly 40% by 2050—only adding to the number of urban young who, in the near future, will be looking for jobs.

After the 1994 Ethiopia’s constitution baptized in Ethnic Federalism adopted from the Marxist-Leninist notion of self-determination the nation has been suffering from all the plights and curses of power struggles, unequal resource distributions, ethnic clashes, border disputes, and displacement to the least. As the political and economic structures are owned and being governed by ethnic identities, ethnic minorities are predators of discrimination and isolation. This is because the constitution does not offer recognition and representation of minority groups who reside outside their

¹ <https://data.oecd.org/unemp/unemployment-rate.htm>

² https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Final-2021-LABOUR-FORCE-AND-MIGRATION-SURVEY_Key-finding-Report-.17AUG2021.pdf

³ World Bank Blogs

ethnic boundaries. This is evidence with the ongoing eviction, displacement, and inhuman killings of innocent and unarmed minorities. Amongst all community groups, youth are the most vulnerable as far as fair distributions of resources and employment opportunities are concerned with.

Every piece of land in Ethiopia was carved as the ethnic homeland of a particular group, constitutionally dividing the population into a permanent majority alongside permanent minorities with little stake in the system⁴. As the constitution grants political power to ethnic majorities, in most cases, youth from minorities have been tagged as ‘outsiders’ or ‘second citizen class’. As a result, the so-called ‘natives’ only who speak the regional/zonal languages have a wider chance of getting self-employed and employed in public offices as well as other language skill requiring sectors. The nicknamed ‘outsiders’ have limited support even for self-employment opportunities. For instance, a graduate from the Amhara region cannot by any means be employed in Oromia or Tigray region in public offices for the very reason of not being able to speak the regional language. Out of the more than 500 Woredas in Ethiopia only less than 40 are monolingual. For instance, Shashemene is a multilingual town yet Ethnic Oromos only have the political power to exercise power. Ethnic minorities, namely Amhara, Wolayta, Hadiya etc, are delineated from most of the resource shares. Youth from the four corners are flooding to Addis Ababa as the job availability and security in other regions are less dependable which in turn has already started debilitating the employment condition in the city.

An article entitled ‘The Employment Effects of Ethnic Politics⁵’ asserted that individuals from ethnicities connected to parties handing the political leadership can enjoy a competitive advantage in the local labor market and resources related

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/03/opinion/ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-reforms-ethnic-conflict-ethnic-federalism.html>

⁵ <https://docs.iza.org/dp12818.pdf>

to land ownership. Another study ⁶ concluded that the most party-loyal cadres of each social group, including youth, are rewarded with opportunities. Unlike globalization in which our world is experiencing political and economic convergence, Ethiopia is forfeiting its educated group for lingua-territorial geographies.

Increasing cases of unemployed graduate youth who are squandering their time and knowledge investment in desperate search of jobs witness the narrowing job market aggravated by the war-torn economy, the western sanction burden, the ill designed economic policy as well as the ethno-nationalism born social crisis. A recent graduate with BSC in midwifery and 3.9 GPA named Taliye said to BBC Amharic “no organization could employ me; I have started a street petty trade in Addis Ababa as Amhara region which I belong to has no opening at the time”. The mushroomed Ethiopian universities are still producing huge number of graduates with almost no hope of employment.

The New York Times writer Mamdani strongly recommends that Ethiopia should adopt a different kind of federation — territorial and not ethnic — where rights in a federal unit are dispensed not on the basis of ethnicity but on residence. Such a federal arrangement will give Ethiopians an even chance of keeping an authoritarian dictatorship at howl. Territorial structure allows the youth to freely cross domestic borders and penetrate the labor market on a merit basis. In addition, the ethnic nationalism born clashes and riots that pushed back investors and investment will end up and hope for increased employment start up.

The above writer concludes “The reforms by the country’s new prime minister are clashing with its flawed Constitution and could push the country toward an

⁶ <https://www.cmi.no/publications/8798-poorly-designed-youth-employment-programmes-will-boost-the-insurgency-in-mozambique>

interethnic conflict.” I conclude that such conflict bears unemployment, and the unemployment bears conflicts, a vicious headache.