

Narratives of Development and Developmentalism in Ethiopia: Some Observations

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Development has remained one of the key aspirations of the developing world. There is, however, little consensus what it actually means and how it could be brought about. This is also true in the Ethiopia.

Since the beginning of 2000s, the EPRDF began to portray poverty as an existential threat to the country. Consequently, it began to present itself as a ‘developmental state’. Concomitantly, it was said that neoliberalism faced its dead-end in bringing development in Africa. Hence, what is required is a ‘democratic developmental state’. The ideology of Developmentalism was also given a big boost after the controversial 2005 elections. The government and its media in a sustained fashion sought to divert the attention of the public from political discord to development. The sustenance of double digit growth rate since 2005 and rapid expansion in infrastructure and provision of social services further reinforced the idea of Developmentalism in Ethiopia. Following the 2010 parliamentary elections, the EPRDF as a winning party endorsed a five year ambitious ‘Growth and Transformation Plan’.

However, there are deep contradictions in the narratives of development and Developmentalism in the country. First, for the EPRDF and its supporters, the economic successes that the country witnessed in the last several years should be credited to the democratic developmental strategies and practices of the ruling party. Second, almost all of the opposition political parties accuse the regime of using development as an instrument of consolidating its grip on power by undermining electoral democracy. The third position – which could be said the position of independent commentators – takes a somewhat middle ground approach. This group on the one hand appreciates successes in terms of infrastructural development and expansion of social services. It on the other hand, points out rampant inflation and a dramatic disparity of income which adversely affect the common man and women on the street.

By taking what has been stated above as a background, this paper examines the contradictory narratives on such issues as ‘developmental state’; ‘economic growth’; ‘development strategies’; ‘equity and social justice’; ‘urban development and renewal’ and others. The study hopes to provide insights how issues of development are contested and negotiated in a country which has a long history of dictatorship and economic stagnation. In terms of methodology, the paper uses information that will be gathered from official documents, newspapers and magazines and others.