

Human Rights in Polarized Ethiopia: the need for collaboration

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Part one of three

Remark

This series is intended for the benefit of those who did not attend the forum.

Why are human rights essential?

If we respect ourselves as people and want the world community to respect us and support our causes, we must face up to the demanding responsibility of owning and leading the struggle for human dignity, rights, the rule of law and representative governance ourselves. No one will do it for us. In terms of justice, rights, fair distribution of incomes and access to opportunities, sustainable and equitable development and the like the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) controlled and led government of Ethiopia has failed. This is one part of the story. The other is what the rest of us are doing to redress the situation. Blaming others, including the repressive regime is easy. Offering a compelling alternative is hard.

I believe that we---the people of Ethiopia at home and those of us in the Diaspora who believe in their plight and cause---can make a difference. For this to happen we must overcome the Tigray People's Liberation Front's corrosive ideology of irreconcilability among Ethiopia's 96 million people. This ideology is based on hate rather than mutual respect and tolerance. Often times, it seems that we are driven by the ruling party's ideology and strategy of worshipping our differences rather than our incredible diversity. Observers find it hard to believe that Ethiopia's opposition within and outside the country is reactive rather than proactive. It is often driven by the ruling party's agenda rather than its own. Those of us who want a government that is accountable to and serves the people are unable to lead the struggle; we simply react to it. Let us face it. Most of us want justice but defer to others to gain it for us; even if it costs their lives. Freedom and justice are not free goods anywhere in the world. They are earned.

By now, we should know that TPLF and by extension, the EPRDF ideology is determined to "divide and rule" and control the national economy and resources in perpetuity. It does this through a web of controlling institutions and through fear. It has foreign support.

I find it utterly sad that Ethiopia's civic and political opposition groups and prominent individuals who should know better "have agreed to disagree" in perpetuity (ለለመስማማት መስማማት) as a matter of principle. This is exactly what the TPLF/EPRDF wants us to do. In part, this phenomenon is an outcome of the deliberate polarization of Ethiopian society and the diminishing of common bonds. Ethnic and religious based polarization is essentially Balkanization and effective de-Ethiopianization. It is a means of control and as such a means to diminish rights and to disempower.

Polarization has the unintended consequence of reducing collaboration and unity on the fundamental principle of human rights and fundamental freedom among those who live outside the country as much as those who live in Ethiopia. In my mind, rights and fundamental freedom are indivisible. They are ethnic, age, gender and religion blind. They apply to Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Somali, Gurage, Annuak etc. alike. One life is no better than the other. One ethnic or religious group is no better than the other. It is this we have failed to recognize and realize. Most of us are oblivious to the fact that the ruling party has made numerous inexcusable mistakes. I have highlighted these in the past and will mention the core ones again.

Policy mistakes generations won't forget

TPLF's history with regard to harming Ethiopia's long-term interests and the security of its people is replete with failures:

- i) It abandoned Ethiopia's legitimate access to the sea and made it land locked**
- ii) It failed to address the policy, cultural and structural roots of hunger, malnourishment, environmental degradation, job security and ownership of land and other assets by Ethiopians**
- iii) It ceded vast tracts of fertile lands and waters to North Sudan**
- iv) It polarized Ethiopian society by pitying one group against another**
- v) It transferred millions of hectares of farmlands and waters to foreign investors (Karuturi, Saudi Star and others) in an opaque manner dispossessing Ethiopians, making the country vulnerable to political conflict and disintegration**
- vi) It closed political, social and economic space making a mockery of its own Constitution**
- vii) It caused the largest human (social capital) exodus in the country's history thereby eroding talent and continuity**
- viii) It created unprecedented income inequality through deliberate party intervention in procurement, credit, access to land, permits and the like**
- ix) It opened up Ethiopia's wombs by selling and or transferring real resources from Ethiopians to foreign investors, crowded out deserving and hardworking Ethiopians and deterred the national private sector from emerging**
- x) It burdened future generations with foreign debt that has reached \$20 billion and domestic borrowing and debt in excess of 60 billion Birr**

- xi) It directly or indirectly sponsored or facilitated illicit outflow of capital in excess of \$30 billion to-date, about \$3 billion per year
- xii) It established and institutionalized assaults on civil liberties and human rights and implanted a culture of fear and mutual suspicion

Finally, the TPLF admits policy and program failures of its own making without taking the bold and necessary step of freeing the society so that it can participate in transforming the governance that causes and perpetuates “the rut” Ethiopia faces. Given this set of failures, the civil and political opposition has no excuse but create solidarity on common issues of which advocacy on human rights is central.

Are we not squandering what we have in common?

In my view—I know there are different perspectives on this-- Ethiopia is our common geopolitical anchor that we share. It is worth saving. It is enough for everyone and can be prosperous. Commonality on this is fundamental if we wish to pursue active advocacy on human rights. The whole is critical in that it is a source of potential strength rather than weakness. If the parts pull in every direction—one day as Amhara, the other day as Oromo etc. -- the social strength and diplomatic clout emanating from fragmentation will diminish our impact substantially. This is the reality today.

In turn, fragmentation will continue to strengthen the governing party. This is why I argue that fragmentation is in effect the same thing as working for the governing party. Chastising one another provides another tool to the governing party. The sum total of bickering, fragmentation, accusation and counter accusation with the opposition camp is the least costly or costless method by which the TPLF/EPRDF continues to rule. If this persists, I can predict that the TPLF/EPRDF will win elections over and over again. A fragmented opposition cannot lead a country.

To overcome this recurrent vacuum in organization, unity of purpose and farsighted leadership on human rights and justice is wisdom. How do we do this? We can focus on the critical issues we face in common, human rights, justice and the rule of law. We can come together and agree on the way forward. We can discuss and agree that rights encompass everything that affects human life: political, human, social, culture, economics, religion, natural resources, indigenous people, minorities, environmental etc. This does not have to be a fight for political power or recognition or glory or group think.

The world community and the Ethiopian people keep telling us to speak with one voice on rights. Donors, the diplomatic community and the UN system would listen to us if we overcome this self-made hurdle of divided voices on what is a common issue. If we don't speak with one voice, they will have little incentive to take human rights advocates seriously. Therefore, here is my first plea. Let us move from blaming one another to collaborating with one another. Let us have a series of round table discussions and come up with a framework or a roadmap and share it with the Ethiopian people.

I urge you to keep in mind that Ethiopia is a country of consequence not only for its diverse population; but to the whole of Africa and the entire world. It is the seat of the African Union, commands a strategic location and sits on immense water and fertile land resources that foreign investors and governments are attracted to. It has a population of 96 to 100 million people, the second largest in Africa. More than 50 percent of Ethiopians are below the age of 18 (UNFPA/2014), 70 to 80 percent are below the age of 45.

Ethiopia is identified as one of the fastest growing in the world. This is an illusion if we measure growth against the wellbeing of the vast majority of Ethiopians. Over the past few years, I have tried to show that Ethiopia's growth fueled by massive aid, remittances and government borrowing has resulted in significant improvements in social and physical infrastructure. It has enriched the few while leaving tens of millions destitute and poor. The most noticeable social reality in the country is that the vast majority of Ethiopians are as destitute and some say more destitute and poorer than they have ever been. Accordingly, the development model is an utter failure. How is this possible? Why this paradox of growth and destitution?

Economic and Social Rights

Development is about unleashing human potential. Economic growth alone does not measure social and economic wellbeing. Ethiopia cannot be an exception. In 2013, UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) ranked Ethiopia 173rd out of 187 countries and the Ethiopian government disputed this too. It is likely to dispute the latest from UNCTAD. In one of the boldest and most frank evaluations of growth without sustainability and equity---a subject matter on which I have written four books since I retired from the World Bank---one of the UN's technical arm, UNCTAD wrote a scathing report on December 2, 2014 under the title "Most of the world's poor nations are stuck in a rut," a vicious cycle from which they cannot extricate themselves without radical social, economic and political reforms.

AFP quotes, "The planet's poorest nations like Ethiopia, Malawi and Angola have failed to cash in on strong economic growth due to a lack of structural reforms and left them wallowing in poverty." This finding based on realities on the ground tells us the opposite of what donors and the diplomatic community that shore up the Ethiopia Surveillance State have been saying. Ethiopia has been in a "rut" for some time. Why is "Ethiopia stuck in a vicious cycle of destitution and poverty?"

Millions of Ethiopians live in debilitating poverty and destitution because they do not have a voice. They are not empowered. They are not allowed to elect their representatives. They have no voice in their government. They do not have a government that is accountable to them. They are not allowed to provide inputs in the formulation of policies that benefit them; or in the planning and execution of programs that make a difference to their lives.

Good governance determines sustainable and equitable development. According to UNCTAD "The LDC (least developed countries) paradox arises from the failure of LDC economies to

achieve structural changes despite having grown vigorously as a result of strong export prices (Angola) and rising aid flows (Ethiopia).” The structural deficit is a policy deficit emanating from repressive governance and opaque regulatory framework that leaves no room for domestic competition and the emergence of a private sector. Ethiopia’s economy is as politicized and ethnicized as its social and political system. Over the past two decades there has been a trust deficit in addition to others. Access to economic and social opportunities is not considered a right but a privilege. Privilege entails loyalty; they reinforce one another.

The donor community is not blameless

Donors and diplomats alike accept the Ethiopian government’s bogus statistics and conclusions at face value. Unlike UNCTAD, they do not go out and see the conditions of life among the vast majority of Ethiopians. They do not question why domestic manufacturing owned by Ethiopians and employing Ethiopians has not expanded at a fast rate. It is true that one of the poorest and food aid dependent countries on the planet has produced more than 2,700 millionaires since the 2005 elections. These millionaires are supported by and affiliated to the TPLF. Despite double digit growth that is contentious and unreliable, “Nearly half of the population in LDCs (more in Ethiopia) continue to live in extreme poverty, almost 30 percent of the people are undernourished and only few are in a secure employment.”

Adequate food, shelter, safe drinking water, safe sanitation, employment, education and health are within the sphere of human rights. Consider Ethiopia’s demographics and the right to meaningful employment and judge. Development is about the future. The future is inconceivable without youth empowerment. Fifty percent of Ethiopians are below the age of 18, and an estimated 70 to 80 percent of the population is below the age of 50. Informed sources say that unemployment and underemployment among youth is a staggering 40 percent and in some towns and cities 70 percent.

No wonder then the exodus among this age group continues unabated. The Ethiopian government has failed Ethiopian youth. Investment in youth is among the lowest in Africa. The Ethiopian government is not investing in manufacturing, agro-industry, commercial agriculture and other enterprises owned and run by Ethiopians for the benefit of Ethiopians. Nor is it empowering Ethiopians to invest. Illicit outflow of financial has reached a scandalous level.

This is at the heart of the structural reform deficit that UNCTAD is talking about. The other deficit that perpetuates the “rut” is lack of good and participatory governance. Ethiopians have literally no choice in policy. Political and civic space is completely closed. This suits the TPLF/EPRDF. For the party, politics and or economics is a “zero sum game.” Someone has to lose in order for those in power to enjoy the fruits of political capture. Elites at the top of the decision making pyramid have no moral compunction to stop ill gains or ill governance.

The TPLF/EPRDF insists on comparing Ethiopia with Ethiopia. UNCTAD has done the right thing by comparing Ethiopia with other poor countries using a benchmark of success in the

rest. Contrast Ethiopia with Bangladesh, Cambodia and Vietnam where productivity has been growing by “an average of 3.2 percent per year since the 1990s.” These countries are industrializing at a fast rate and will join the family of modern and rich nations over the coming decade or so. Before he passed, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi kept telling the world that Ethiopia will achieve middle income status by 2015-2020. This wishful and deceptive declaration has evaporated. “Of the 48 nations (including Ethiopia), only Laos is likely to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS)” by 2015.

The social and economic indicators are staggering and shocking. Access to safe drinking water is a human right. Fifty percent of Ethiopians do not have access to safe drinking water. Only 21 percent of Ethiopians have access to proper sanitation. In a country that is building massive hydroelectric dams to produce and export electricity, only 2 percent of the rural population has access to electricity. Nationally, the coverage is 12 percent. Poverty affects a disproportionate number of children. Twenty percent of children are undernourished; and more than 2 out of 5 children suffer from stunting. The rural population lives in primitive conditions. It is subjected to complete control by the party.

Despite significant arable land and a farming tradition, Ethiopia is still food aid dependent. It is a country that should be food self-sufficient but isn't. Despite the propagation of double digit growth for a decade, per capita income is \$470, a third of the African average. As noted earlier, Ethiopia produces more millionaires than middle and upper middle class families. The middle class is among the smallest in the world. As Freedom House has shown over and over again, the private sector is suppressed and is not competitive. There is no guarantee of private property. The right to own assets should include land but does not.

Land is owned by the state and party and is politicized. The structure of Ethiopia's exports remains almost the same. It is dependent of commodity exports, primarily coffee. Ironically, Ethiopia hires foreigners to staff institutions while it exports human capital including domestic workers. Those who would be the backbone of the middle class leave the country in droves. Between 1991 and 2006, of 3,700 MDs educated and trained by Ethiopian tax payers, 3,000 left Ethiopia.

The hemorrhage, especially the exodus of large numbers of females and youth will continue to have devastating social, economic, cultural and multigenerational impacts. The country is not generating a succeeding generations that knows and loves the country and can serve as the backbone of the middle class. This vacuum is an inexcusable disaster. No country achieves sustainability without retaining its educated and well trained workforce.

A state set up to suppress and control

Ethiopia is a Surveillance State that suffocates freedom and rights. For anyone to understand gross violations of human rights and the rule of law, it is vital to comprehend and analyze the nature of the state under the TPLF/EPRDF. The state manifests the merger of ethnic-elite party, government and state. It is not dissimilar to the old East Germany and today's North

Korea. Yet, Western Governments and the UN call Korea a tyranny. It is. So is Ethiopia. Ethiopia's special status is a function of its strategic relations with Western countries, especially the US and the UK. The Ethiopian state version is called Revolutionary Democracy and follows an economic model called the developmental state. It is neither revolutionary nor democratic. It facilitates economic and financial capture. If it were democratic and revolutionary it will reform itself relentlessly. It is not a free market system; but pretends to be one. The federal government controls key institutions of policy and decision-making; and not the regions. Why would this matter?

Defense, Federal Police, Intelligence and Security are vital in maintaining peace, order and stability. Sadly, this is the default line embraced by the state, the donor and diplomatic community and the UN system. It is perceived as major plus. Ethiopia is considered a stable state in a sea of chaos and failed states---Somalia, Eritrea, South and North Sudan.

In my view donors and the diplomatic community strengthen the dictatorship and as proxies suppress freedom. Donors pump more than \$4 billion dollars a year without conditions; the Diaspora an equal amount and the federal government borrows billions of Birr from the banking system and issues bonds to the public and the global community. Ethiopian society is debt-ridden. Someone has to pay this debt. Don't Ethiopians have the right to question this debt? Should future generations be obliged to pay massive debt incurred by the TPLF on which they had no say? Are they not entitled to be share the benefits of growth and investments carried out through aid and borrowing? Don't they have rights?

Ethiopia's Defense and Security Budget

Ethiopia's defense and security budget and staffing reflect the ruling party's own and foreign interests. They support one another. This is a reality opposition groups must grasp. It is the reason why I contend that stability, regional peace and security serve as a default line and enjoy support from Western Governments, especially the US. There is no doubt that the current state is competent. It is well financed and well run. It provides ample incentives to generals and other high officers. Their incentive is to maintain the system at any cost.

As of October 2014, Intelligence agencies and think tanks, including the CIA report that Ethiopia spends 12.6 percent of GDP on defense and related security operations. It spends only 1.2 percent of GDP on education and significantly less on safe drinking water, sanitation and health, malnutrition and the like. The defense budget is slightly less than Saudi Arabia that spends 13 percent and owns chunks of Ethiopian lands. The CIA fact book notes Ethiopia spends a third (33 percent) of domestic government revenue on the military, intelligence and security. The Guardian reports thousands of "bureaucrats are paid to spy on nationals." The amount spent does not include foreign military and intelligence assistance by the US, UK and other nations. We are obliged to ask who is protected and who is the target here? Is the state at war with its own population? Formally, Ethiopia is not at war with any country. Is it at war with its own citizens? You make the judgment based on the facts. You may ask "Why this

huge outlay on defense, intelligence, security and surveillance? If the country is at peace.” The simple answer is that the TPLF leadership fears the population, especially youth. In light of this fear, state control and hegemony is a matter of survival for the TPLF/EPRDF. It is a strategic choice.

The donor and diplomatic community does not see it that way. It is more pragmatic. Stability serves their strategic interests. Stability at the cost of human rights and freedoms gives the false impression that Ethiopians are enjoying safety, security of life, access to opportunities and the like in a region of chaos and hopelessness. The truth is that sustainable peace, stability and growth do not happen without rights, justice and the rule of law. Massive outlay to suppress dissent and control society is tyranny and thus temporary. A well-financed and equipped defense and security system serves the group that sponsors it while alienating the vast majority of the population. This is what happened in Egypt and Libya. The TPLF should know this. The Dergue possessed one of the largest and well equipped armies in Africa but failed at the end.

What is the relevance of this massive outlay in the instruments of control on human rights?

The bottom line is that the default line of stability at any cost provides the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—the ethnic-coalition that controls the state—justification to act as a police state for foreign powers and to get away with impunity by punishing citizens. Sadly, the donor and diplomatic community, the UN System and the AU often fail to grasp the magnitude of the problem by not measuring the Surveillance state’s punishments and potential adverse consequences against universal legal norms and best practices.

Rarely do donors, governments and the UN system go after state actors and human rights violators beyond studies and press releases until the situation is completely out of hand. My contention here is that Ethiopians cannot wait until a Rwanda like situation occurs; nor can the world community.

Stability without respecting human rights is illusory. It is a temporary phenomenon. Like the Soviet Union and North Korea, it may take decades of hard work and struggle by those who seek justice. In the meantime the UN system, donors and the diplomatic community have, at least, a moral obligation to acknowledge that Ethiopians are not asking special privileges. They are asking the world community to treat them the same as other countries that observe the rule of law, accept the dignity and rights of each person and respect international norms to which Ethiopia is a party.

Part II will use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Ethiopian Constitution as a basis to mobilize efforts among Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopians.

