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Boycotting Ethiopian National Elections: Damn if You Do, Damn if You Don't! Messay Kebede

I maintain that the upcoming elections will be a turning point for Ethiopia, not because they will result in a major change of policy subsequent to a renovation of the ruling elite but because the absence of change will compel opposition groups to reassess their strategies and the country as a whole will plunge further into the abyss of despair. While most reasonable people and opposition parties never contemplated the possibility of winning the elections and becoming the new ruling majority, nevertheless the expectation was--- since the death of Meles Zenawi---for some opening, however narrow, to accommodate opposition groups. In light of the prevailing heightened repression and disqualification of some opposition parties from the competition by concocting bogus charges, the expectation proved utterly naïve. It is now patently clear that the EPRDF will use all available means to preserve the status quo indefinitely.

Opposition parties are already variously reacting to the perceived decision to exclude them once again. Some are making their participation conditional on the change of policy of the National Election Board toward a neutral stand guaranteeing a level of playing field. Others have decided to participate regardless of the prevailing conditions because they believe that nothing can be achieved by shunning the elections. Still others seem undecided or are waiting for the development of the situation before taking a definitive stance. This article analyzes the cons and pros of participating in the upcoming elections with the view of showing the realistic alternative that emerges from taking part in the elections or boycotting them.

Let us state plainly the emerging quandary. Admittedly, the goal of participation is not to win, not because the regime is popular and has the allegiance of the majority of voters, but because it will use threat, harassment, deceit, and even violence to retain its present position, which is that only one parliament member is representing the opposition. The opposition may even lose this one seat or add some more, but the retention of an overwhelming majority will be the inevitable outcome of the elections. If so, why then participate when there is no the slightest opportunity to perform better?

Expected Gains from Participation

Those who opt for participation argue that winning has many forms. Indeed, elections, even if they are unwinnable, provide a good opportunity to denounce the regime. They supply a convenient platform to openly expose the failures and injustice of the regime at a time when popular attention and expectations are activated by the government's own propaganda and its desire for renewed legitimacy. Exposing the regime is a vital component of nonviolent opposition. It is inconsistent to stay away from elections because the regime in place does not allow a fair playing field even as the purpose of peaceful struggle is, precisely, to mobilize voters to protest against the unfair conditions of political competition. Only such protests can bring about change, not boycott.

Parties that participate in elections find a good opportunity to promote themselves and make their program known to the public. Not only does participation help the recruitment of new members, but it also engages the party in the typical task of organizing and mobilizing the people. A party that is absent from the battle field on the pretext that conditions are highly unfavorable does not deserve to be called an opposition party, all the more so as it came into existence primarily to fight for the democratic opening of the political system.

To encourage people to oppose the regime, it is imperative to show the availability of an alternative program. If people are not exposed to the ideas of a viable organization and alternative policy, their legitimate fear of the unknown, including the possibility of a chaos, will prevail over their frustrations and make them stick to the status quo. Nothing extends more the life of unpopular governments than the lack of an alternative: such governments will always claim that the opposition is fearful to participate because it is too weak or has no viable rival program. And nothing shortens more their existence than the presence of a party that continues to fight against all odds. So that, in willingly participating in elections that are decided in advance, the opposition party demonstrates its full commitment, thereby changing its alleged weakness into the strength of steadfastness.

There is no telling in advance whether participation does not result in the gain of some seats. However limited, seats in the parliament offer the opportunity of voicing opposition from within the system, not so much to change the ongoing policy as to give more credibility to the availability of an alternative path. Parliamentary

representation officializes opposition in the eyes of the people as well as of the government, forcing the latter to respond to criticisms instead of simply dismissing them as the views of outcasts.

To sum up, participation in elections, even when they are completely unfair, is not devoid of appreciable gains. In addition to being consistent with the choice of nonviolent opposition, it provides a much needed forum for opposition parties to convey their messages, mobilize voters, and strengthen their standing. By contrast, the rejection of elections until acceptable conditions emerges is defeatist and inconsistent with peaceful opposition, not to mention that it obtains and change nothing.

Expected Gains from Non-Participation

Naturally, those who favor boycotting the elections are not without some expectations of gains as well. To the extent that their decision is a political one, it must contain the possibility of advancing their cause in some way. So what do they expect to achieve in shining the elections?

Their main argument is that non-participation of opposition parties deprives the government of the legitimacy that it seeks by organizing these elections. Participating without the chance of winning even one seat is nothing but a free gift to the government. In advertising the pitiful result of the opposition, the government will have the easy game of declaring a crushing victory and portraying the opposition as irrelevant, nonexistent.

To take part under the existing conditions is to encourage the government to continue the same electoral policy. The only leverage that opposition parties have is that the government wants popular legitimacy by all means so that it is suicidal to give it up for what is nothing but a staged show to fool the Ethiopian people as well as the international community. Since opposition parties cannot expect anything unless existing conditions change, the kind of pressure liable to yield some results is precisely to make their participations conditional on some concessions on the part of the government. For this pressure to succeed, there is one and only one condition: the boycott must be unanimous and firm.

Experience teaches us that taking part in the elections under existing conditions will not result in any gain of parliamentary seat. Recall what happened to the All Ethiopian Unity Party in the 2010 elections: it broke away from the rest of the opposition by agreeing to participate without any tangible reforms of the electoral process only to find out that it was unable to secure even one seat despite its undeniable popularity in the Amhara region. What is more, opposition parties that already had some seats were completely wiped out. Obviously, the refusal of the government to make changes in the electoral process is motivated by a deliberate policy of expulsion of the opposition, and not by the precaution of having a sizeable majority.

As to exposing the anti-democratic nature of the regime, what else is more resoundingly revealing it than the refusal to participate in fake elections? By openly stating that participation depends on the creation of a level playing field, opposition parties do their primary job, namely, the presentation of reasonable and expected demands that normally go along with the very idea of holding elections. If elections do not have a minimum of fairness, they cease to be elections and turn into an exercise of canonization. The least that opposition parties can do is to put an end to this quinquennial farce.

Critical Assessment

What is striking about the above position is the belief that the refusal to participate puts pressure on the government. It would have been so if the opposition were united and the boycott unanimous. But to expect unity and a unanimous position is to assume solved the very problem that keeps the TPLF in power. Those who speaks of pressure put the cart before the horse by forgetting that the persistence of the hegemony of the TPLF is due to the success of its divide-and-rule policy, essentially manifested by the ethnicization of Ethiopia. Moreover, I do not remember a case where this government changed its opinion because of popular protests, let alone because of complaints from opposition parties. In other words, as hard as it may seem to accept, opposition parties have no leverage on this government.

True, the government wants legitimacy, but it can obtain it in various ways. For instance, it can force people to vote in great number so as to compensate the lack of opposition parties with a massive popular endorsement. Dictatorial regimes have practiced and refined this method for quite some time. If at all costs the presence of an opposition is required, the government can create fake opposition parties or divide existing parties by means of threats and bribes. This should not come as a surprise since the government has already given us the taste of such methods, just as it is presently doing it by prohibiting two major opposition parties, namely, Unity for Democracy and Justice Party and All Ethiopian Unity Party.

Given these available recourses, we can say that the government wants legitimacy, but not to the point of making concessions to the opposition. All the more reason for saying so is that legitimacy is essentially sought to shore up its international reputation, especially in the eyes of donor countries. Unfortunately, we have seen time and again that foreign countries, including democratic countries, are more interested in doing business than in denouncing and punishing undemocratic regimes.

To demand repeatedly for something and repeatedly obtain nothing, to the extent that it reveals the absence of leverage on the government, is easily construed as a demonstration of insurmountable weakness and inability to emerge as an alternative. What else can the people conclude from this constant failure to put pressure on the government but the utter weakness and irrelevance of the opposition? Since the opposition cannot extract the slightest concession from the government, there is no reason for the people to side with the opposition and become the target of government retaliation. Voting for the government may not bring change but at least it protects against retaliation.

As a matter of fact, neither participation nor boycott adds anything to the goal of denunciation for the simple reason that the anti-democratic nature of the regime has long ceased to be a mystery to foreigners or natives. If we still find Ethiopians who are not aware of its real nature, such people are better left alone since they are either irremediably apolitical or indifferent to what is going around them.

What about mobilization and organization? Does participation, as claimed by those opposing boycott, serve to strengthen opposition parties? It would have been so if the government would allow freedom of expression and organization. Such disposition would mean that the government is ready to face opposition in a level playing ground. But the very dilemma over participation stems from the knowledge that the government will not allow a condition of fair competition, that it will paralyze the opposition by restrictions, harassments, and imprisonments, not to mention the silencing of the free press. To expect the strengthening of the opposition as a result of participation is just a wishful thinking.

The likely outcome being that participation will not bring any result, it removes the grounds for complaint about the lack of democracy. Your participation was a defiance intent on showing that you can pierce the barrier of exclusion. Your failure to do so only exposes your weakness and irrelevance. The aim of the government is not to show its strength by winning elections; rather, it is to display overtly that it has no real rivals worthy of that name. It does not want to win majority votes; it wants to ridicule the opposition by a crushing victory, thereby showing that there is no alternative to its rule. The proper analogy expressing Ethiopian elections is two soccer teams competing with the players of one of the teams being blindfolded.

In fact, a clear pattern emerges from the manner the government deals with opposition parties. Plainly, the government steps up its repressive power when it confronts unitary parties, such as the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party and All Ethiopian Unity Party, while being more tolerant of opposition parties with an ethnic banner. In ruthlessly repressing unitary parties, the government wants to bring about their final demise. The relative tolerance of the government to ethnicized opposition parties is, for sure, due to the perception of some affinity with its own policy; more importantly, however, it originates from the conviction that ethnic parties, fragmented as they are, can never become a threat to the hegemony of the TPLF. Add to this that it is simply easy to create hostility between these parties and reduce them to the permanent status of a negligible opposition.

The real threat, if fair elections were held, comes from unitary parties, as demonstrated by the success of Kinijit in 2005. In the eyes of the TPLF, Ethiopian nationalist parties cannot be allowed to grow, for the real enemy to its hegemony--which rests on the efficient implementation of divide-and-rule policy--is none other than Ethiopian nationalism. It is amazing that more than 20 years of uninterrupted attack and stifling have not succeeded in weakening Ethiopian nationalism. It has become the forbidden fruit: the more you want to muffle it, the more people want it.

Who Wins?

What springs from all is clear enough: opposition parties, whether they participate or not, lose in that none of the projected goals ascribed to participation or boycott is achievable. Neither participation nor boycott affects the standing of the government or the state of opposition parties in any meaningful way. Does this mean that the government win?

One thing is sure: after the elections, the government will not be better off. Not only will it face the same problems, but also its intransigence and repressive policy will heighten popular frustration and instill the sense of a political deadlock in the country. In other words, there is no winner, but only a huge loser, namely, nonviolent, peaceful opposition. Seeing the complete ineffectiveness of participation or boycott, people, especially the young, are increasingly bound to question the wisdom of peaceful opposition. The more repression continues, the more the deadlock over the possibility of change thickens, and the higher becomes the disposition toward uprising as the only alternative left. This is the iron law of all social blockage: Ethiopia will not be an exception.

When uprising becomes the only way out, young activists go underground or join armed struggle. Exciting nonviolent parties, too, to the extent that they are serious about the struggle for change, will be compelled to have a hard look at their strategy. Even if they continue to operate in a legal manner, it is no longer to win seats

in the parliament. Instead, they anticipate uprising and hope to take its leadership when it erupts. Without doubt, the present attitude of the TPLF gives Ethiopians no other choice than revolution with, alas, the unpredictable but certainly severe and uncontrollable consequences that confrontation or civil war will have in present-day Ethiopia. Ethiopians, gear up for the worst!

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"Our voice may be small now, but together all of us can make a difference"