

Ethiopia's State of Siege and Revolutionary Democracy

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Part III of III

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) created and still dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (the TPLF) traces the tenets of its core ideology of "Revolutionary Democracy (RD)" and the "Developmental State" to Marxism-Leninism, Maoism and Albanian Communism. Had the Soviet communist model continued, it would be part of the international proletarian architecture and thus a competitor to the American led and dominated system of democratic liberalism and the market economy. RD is radically and irredeemably different from either liberal or social democracy.



Ethiopia's "Revolutionary Democracy" has morphed into a mixture of elite political and economic capture that leaves the vast majority of the Ethiopian people marginalized and millions impoverished; and into a state sponsored "market" system in which the party and government dominate economic life. **There is no open and competitive market in Ethiopia.** The domestic economy is at the mercy of domestic plunder and entrapment by Foreign Direct Investment and investors. An indigenous or national entrepreneurial and owning business class is unable to emerge because of the political economy of elite capture.

The country's youth, women and ethnic groups in the Omo valley, the country's green belt in the south, Gambella, Beni-Shangul, Afar and others continue to demand justice from their own government. The "Developmental state" has not only ignored them; it has literally **disempowered and dispossessed** them.

The TPLF/EPRDF legitimizes its rule by any means through the formation and support of mass organizations including identity-based groups, youth, women, urban dwellers and trade unions. These mass structures keep an eye on ordinary people. They are almost mini-governments and serve the dual purpose of administering themselves and their localities and as a network of spies for the system. The façade given is that they institutionalize and defend "democracy." There is no plausible answer for the question of "whose democracy?"

Independent civil society, political organizations and media are criminalized because they question and subvert the party's monopoly of power and riches.

"Revolutionary Democracy" to which the TPLF/EPRDF is committed is, by definition and in reality, a communist ideology with a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist and Albanian Hohaist world view. The regime that the TPLF/EPRDF "replaced" followed a similar socialist ideology and failed. The military socialist dictatorship failed because it did not accept its prime responsibility to serve and protect the people. By the same token, the TPLF/EPRDF left leaning regime continues to pretend to the global community that it is committed to "democracy and inclusive

development" as well as to the market system. Organized state and private theft (corruption,

nepotism, illicit outflow of massive funds out of Ethiopia, contraband trade) continue to bleed Ethiopian society. The party and government operate above the law.

Corruption and illicit outflow of funds estimated at between \$30 and \$40 billion have devastated the national economy; and undermined the social fabric of Ethiopian society. There is little capital left to establish new factories and to create jobs for millions of young people.

There is little left to modernize the agricultural sector. The structure of the economy remains primitive. Environmental degradation is a threat to Ethiopia.

My argument is that an outdated system that members of the old Soviet Union rejected cannot possibly be good for Ethiopia and for Ethiopians. **It is actually alien to Ethiopian society.**

Ethiopians and the world community would remember that the Military-Socialist Dictatorship felt strongly that Ethiopia's broad masses, especially the working class and the peasantry, oppressed women, nations and nationalities deserved a social system that will empower them; and free them from the ravages of famine, from class oppression and from abject poverty. To its credit, the dictatorship abolished the feudal land ownership system and nationalized all lands.

Sadly, land ownership under the current regime is ownership by the governing party, its loyalists and foreign investors. Land to the tiller has been converted conveniently to that of land ownership by the few members of the TPLF/EPRDF elites and by foreign investors who collude with the new class of "owners."

The reasoning behind the TPLF/EPRDF Marxian and Leninist view is that scientific socialism describes history, society, economics, religion, international relations and private ownership of the means of production and governs the relationships of classes and peoples and the future growth and development of nations better than any other system, including the market system. The ultimate objective of the Marxist-Leninist theory of scientific socialism is to create a "classless society." Social justice is therefore a critical justification for "Revolutionary

Democracy." It is a transformative model, so goes the argument. After all, who would argue against this Utopia that treats each and every citizen as equal? RD does none of these.

The reality is this. "Revolutionary Democracy" bestows disproportionate political power to the few. And the few that dominate the government and state superstructure dominate the pillars of the economy including urban and rural lands, telecommunication and transport, manufacturing, customs and trade. This is why there is friction within the EPRDF.

Those who wield power and influence over politics and economics cannot exercise either without controlling **the legal system and core institutions.** This is why they control the federal legal, security, defense and police, diplomatic, banking and other critical institutions. Real democracy establishes independent institutions that do not serve the party; but the people. It

commits itself to free and fair elections. This is **why the rule of law is possible under real democracy;** but is impossible under "Revolutionary Democracy."

Under "Revolutionary Democracy," the "Developmental State" is endowed with enormous powers to make investment decisions. This privilege enables the party, state and government to choose winners and losers. Consequently, the domestic private sector is crowded-out by party owned and affiliated entities. The regulatory system favors them and the state. The domestic private sector has limited scope to compete for lands, foreign exchange and other critical inputs.

My argument is that Ethiopia's "Revolutionary Democracy" and the "Developmental State" have no resemblance even to the Marxism, Marxian economics and thus to scientific socialism of yesteryears let alone to the freedom enhancing democracy that most democratic nations enjoy. The Soviet system collapsed because it was unable to fulfil the material, spiritual and political demands of the nations that constituted the Soviet Union. Peasants and workers were alienated both from the means of production and from the benefits of economic growth and development.

This does not mean growth and development did not take place. They did. For example, there was massive and broad investment in social and economic infrastructure and in science and technology. The Soviet system created Sputnik and other extraordinary scientific marvels. But it suffered from quality of **life and more important from a deficit of justice**.

Freedom, the rule of law and real democracy were squashed. These fundamental principles that empower ordinary citizens to do extraordinary things were suppressed. Then emerged Mikhail Gorbachev, who promoted the famous perestroika or “political and economic reforms.” Sadly, the mighty Soviet Union collapsed without creating a foundation for both freedom and a resilient socioeconomic system. Massive privatization was carried-out without strategic planning. A few families became super rich. Corruption is rampant etc.

The same thing happened in Ethiopia in the 1990s. Similar to the old Soviet system in which an entrenched class with enormous privileges emerged; the TPLF/EPRDF followed the model, privatized national assets; and created a new class thereby negating entirely the pretense of “Revolutionary Democracy.”

Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Stalin and others would wonder in their graves how an African elite would bastardize and degrade the honorable principle of “emancipating” the masses; and instead captures the state for the benefit of a few elites. The new class of elites in Ethiopia has now become a well-entrenched and wealthy bureaucracy not much different from that of the Soviet system that collapsed miserably.

Mao’s system has, however evolved a Socialist economy totally committed to the market system. More than anything else, China’s model is nationalist and has little resemblance to the Soviet system. The Chinese “Developmental state” has lifted hundreds of millions of people out

of poverty; and enabled them to become part of the country’s emerging middle class. Women are among the lead beneficiaries of this system. Surveys show that Chinese youth, women (Half the Sky, to use Mao’s famous term) and minorities feel empowered.

The structure of the Chinese economy has been changed dramatically and irreversibly. At least, the Chinese system has proved resilient in making poverty history. For sure, the Chinese system suffers from a deficit of freedom enhancing democratic governance.

In conclusion, the highly trumpeted TPLF/EPRDF “Revolutionary Democracy” and its “Developmental state” **model offer neither adequate bread nor freedom**. This is why both the government and development model must be changed sooner than later.

The highly celebrated election of Dr. Abiy Ahmed as Ethiopia’s Prime Minister ushers in a new and promising era for Ethiopia’s 110 million people; and poses a huge challenge for this young and promising leader. While there is no doubt in mind that he will be able to **carry-out modest** reforms, the hurdles he will face are equally daunting:

- “Revolutionary Democracy and the Developmental state” and its relevance
- The ill-defined demarcation between party ownership of assets and privatization and the Ethiopian private sector
- The rescinding of the draconian emergency proclamation
- The ethnic and language based federal system and the strengthening of Ethiopia; and the narrative of ኢትዮጵያዊነት (Ethiopian as a defining national identity)
- The elimination of corruption at the core or pinnacle
- The release of all political prisoners
- The convention of an all-inclusive conference for peace, reconciliation, national consensus and a peaceful transition that will facilitate the first free and fair election in Ethiopian history
- The transformation of the TPLF dominated and commandeered security, federal police and defense system into a truly independent, **integrated and representative Ethiopian institutional asset**

These are enormous challenges for any one. Courage and careful planning and execution are therefore vital. So is popular support for fundamental change. We should never lose sight that we cannot afford to lose another opportunity for fundamental change in Ethiopia.

The great South African and world leader, Nelson Mandela, who faced the greatest challenge that any human being and leader faced said this.

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.”