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Perspective on an article written by Ato Mehari Taddele Maru entitled

“The old EPRDF is dead, can its system be saved? Five steps to save the federation”

October 3, 2018

“The old EPRDF is dead” writes Ato Mehari without telling us what the old EPRDF was but we know it was surely a coalition of parties dominated by the TPLF and “yes men” in the coalition ANDM (now ADM), OPDO(ODP) and SEPDM. In the old EPRDF, the TPLF’s party program was the modus operandi for all coalition parties in the EPRDF and when PM Meles purged his opponents in the TPLF his vision and dictate became the EPRDF’s modus operandi . Clearly, some say following the death of PM Meles observable confusion set in the TPLF “leadership” and the death of the old EPRDF began to set in. It accelerated with the youth uprising and when team Lemma’s formation and power assertion increasingly found its footing within the EPRDF. Lemma’s team leadership and constitutional assertion of its powers eventually led to the TPLF’s loss of dominance and isolation in the EPRDF. The election of PM Abiye Ahmed was the coronation of a reformed EPRDF and the last nail on the coffin of the “old EPRDF”. Ato Mehari says he had argued in 2007 that if the TPLF’s “founding principles incorporated in the nation’s constitution such as Article 9, the sovereignty of ethno-cultural communities; Article 39, the right to self-determination up to secession; and Article 40, the collective ownership of land”, lost support or is reversed, then he thinks that is an indication that we have moved to “post EPRDF era”. As of the eleventh congress of the EPRDF, there hasn’t been any constitutional amendments/changes and so according to Ato Mehari’s reasoning , we haven’t moved to the “post EPRDF era”. No amendments now to the constitution however, does not mean, no death to the “old EPRDF”. The critical reforms within the coalition parties (i.e. ODP,ADP, and to a degree in SEPDM) means the old arrangement is dead and the gestation and birth of a new EPRDF is well underway. This development in fact has created a post “TPLF dominated era” with significant implications on the direction of the “New EPRDF”.

Ato Mehari believes “the federation is in danger” now that the TPLF’s dominance is diminished within the EPRDF. He sees danger but doesn’t tell us how the new leadership and strong alliances within the coalition (regardless of the diminished TPLF’s pulling back) portends danger to the federation. Ato Mehari declares “the 11 Congress of the EPRDF will kill the Democratic Developmental State” and it “could mutate from developmental centric to democratic centric ideology”. This statement to me is an indirect admission of Ato Mehari that the ideology and politics of the TPLF is becoming less relevant to the other coalition parties. And as for “democratic centralism” , it has always existed in and for the TPLF and imposed on the other coalition parties but

its future is uncertain as a couple of the EPRDF coalition parties have publicly announced abandonment of this practice.

To be sure, the EPRDF did not exist in the 1970s as Ato Mehari implies. “The TPLF armed struggle .. against the Dergue started on February 18, 1975” (Political History of the TPLF, Aregawi Berhe p.38) and what is true is “The primary structural document the movement produced in the late 70’s shows it to be Tigrayan nationalist and not Ethiopian oriented in its content. It was also pro-Eritrean independence. The original manifesto was drafted clearly as Tigrayan ethnic struggle for independence not as one seeking the political liberation of Ethiopia from the dictatorship of the Derg. In fact, this stand did not change until 1984.” (ETHIOPIA, TPLF AND ROOTS OF THE 2001 POLITICAL TREMOR Paulos Milkias Ph.D. ©2001 p 1.)

Neither the TPLF nor the EPRDF have anything to do with the overthrow of Haile Selassie or the onset of the revolution of 1974 . And as for the “vital characteristics” to use Ato Mehari’s words, the Ethiopian student movement was aimed at doing away with the feudal order and the slogan “down with feudalism” led to the downfall emperor Haile Selassie and his nobilities. The Ethiopian student movement ’s “land to the tiller” was the central slogan directed at opposing the feudal land ownership. The Ethiopian student movement advocated the rights of oppressed nationalities and promoted it believing it can be resolved within the unfolding democratic stage of the Ethiopian revolution. The Ethiopian student movement never advocated the national question as the central question of the revolution. The Ethiopian student movement believed any secession should be considered in light of the nation’s interest as a whole. Yes, Marxism-Leninism was the dominant ideology within the Ethiopian student movement and in its progeny parties EPRP and MEISON. The February 1974 revolution came as a result of mass uprising against the feudal order and later, the struggles of MEISON and EPRP parties and the DERG’s radical land reform measures played critical roles in the direction of the revolution. After more than fifty years, history today shows how the TPLF and other narrow nationalist parties use the national question to fit their narrow nationalist agenda against the interest of the people of Ethiopia.

Ato Mehari says the EPRDF is paralyzed as a result of “shift of focus from war on terror to strategic competition between USA on one hand and China and Russia on the other” . The EPRDF was paralyzed by the TPLF’s poor execution of relations with its coalition partners and also poor governance and lack of legitimacy of the governed. The dominant TPLF party has been an exclusive, narrow-minded, tribal, dictatorial organization and failed to resolve its internal problems. Its unequal relationship between the TPLF and the other coalition parties within the EPRDF was bound to end as we see today. Furthermore , Meles generals in the army who directed wars on al Shabab terrorists in Somalia also turned on the Ethiopian rebelling youth from 2015-2018 , over three years period which definitely led to the TPLF/EPRDF paralysis. The pressure of the youth movement (kerro, fano , zerma) and the dynamics within the governing coalition ended the dominance of the TPLF. The problem of paralysis was caused by internal and not external factors. The perennial big power presence and competition in the strategic horn of Africa continues but the fate of our country now is in the hands of the new leadership of the EPRDF. “Foreign-based Ethiopian activists also played a critical role ”

says Ato Mehari and yes this is true, but I just wonder what other expectation Ato Mehari had when the 27 years of the TPLF dominated EPRDF suppressed and snuffed out independent media, imprisoned and exiled all opposition party leaders through numerous draconian policies and laws. The TPLF dominated one party rule propaganda was sold as Ethiopian news every day. Ato Mehari says “Foreign based” but I say exiled political parties and activists have contributed to the changes we see in Ethiopia, despite attempts over the years by the TPLF dominated EPRDF to jam satellites to stifle diaspora media outlets, websites, bloggers, etc., Yes, the diaspora’s alternative voice that reached the people in and out of Ethiopia indeed played a critical role in the change we see in the country today.

Repression and absolute control of the TPLF over coalition parties and by extension absolute control of the country and the continuous phony elections that increasingly disillusioned the people ended up creating intense conflicts between the TPLF state and the citizenry. Every peaceful demonstration (Moslem community, Konso, students, the feeble opposition parties, holiday celebrations at Irrecha, Waldeba etc., were violently suppressed by the TPLF dominated EPRDF state. The state’s perpetual war on the people of Ethiopia culminated in intense resistance/uprisings and the youth rebellion in Oromia, Amhara and the Southern people and spread like wild fire. Repeated state of emergencies failed to quell these uprisings. The pressure from the rebellions and the slogan “down down Woyane” rang in all corners of the country and forced changes within the EPRDF. This wasn’t “a groundswell of populism” but a spontaneous uprising against the TPLF’s repressive state and without the leadership of any opposition political party. All opposition political parties in the country were weakened, in prison or in exile. It was not “the surge of populism of absolutist Ethiopianist, extreme ethnonationalist, and hyper Pan-Ethiopianists” but a reaction to tyranny and disdain/ aversion for the divide and rule policy of the TPLF that the mass upsurge took root in regional states, particularly in Amhara and Oromia. Every Ethiopian today knows Amhara rebellion was instigated by TPLF’s land grab of Welkait Tsegede that angered the people and the Oromo youth rebellion was instigated by their opposition to TPLF’s master plan for expanding Addis Abeba. The world saw Oromo and Amhara express solidarity when the Amhara movement first demanded the TPLF stop the bloodletting of Oromos followed by the Oromo movement demanding the bloodletting of Amharas to stop. No Ethiopian forgets the horror of the TPLF terrifying actions on the 2016 peaceful Irreecha celebrating crowd and the melee that killed a few hundred people. The TPLF’s horror unleashed that day was in full display for the world community and for some who called it a “TPLF terrorist state” to be visibly vindicated. The EPRDF coalition parties did not lead or “accelerate” these movements as Ato Mehari states but were tailgating it. The new leadership in EPRDF however coopted the youth rebellion and made the necessary reforms to meet its demands peacefully instead of the usual “shoot and ask questions later” reflex of the TPLF dominated state. The TPLF’s “divide and rule” today has morphed to disrupt and resist the reforms of PM Dr. Abiy as conflicts and internal displacements continue to be a problem for the nation.

Ato Mehari proclaims the “federal constitution redefined Ethiopianism and reconceptualized it as egalitarian, inclusive and multicultural identity”. What it did and the subsequent developments show is it defined Ethiopians on ethnic lines in opposition to national unity of its citizens. This ethnic

federalism has been an expression of the divide and rule policy of the TPLF and is far from being egalitarian. It was a method used by the TPLF dominated EPRDF to hold on to power and rob the country blind indefinitely. The TPLF dominated state was far from being egalitarian within the ruling coalition and also the nation at large. Furthermore, what has led to conflicts is not “populism and majoritarianism” but a struggle between PM Dr. Abiyeh’s reform and resistance to his reforms. It is between the TPLF vs other parties in the coalition. Between those entrenched interests in the coalition parties and bureaucracies resistant to change and the young reform supporters of PM Abiyeh coopted from the youth movement.

“These confrontational trends, if left unabated, may set Amhara in a collision course with Tigray over the Wolkait ..” argues Ato Mehari and that may be true since the TPLF’s strong arm and anti-democratic methods in resolving land disputes has become tantamount to an invitation for a gunfight with the Amhara . This invitation to a gunfight is extended to the Afar people also. As for conflict or war between the federal government and Tigray..well it is strictly Ato Mehari’s unfounded speculation because the TPLF has decided to camp out in its warm niche in Tigray and is self-governing and busy putting out fires around its “killil”. Ato Mehari’s anticipation of a TPLF conflict with the federal government rings hollow and resembles echoes from the olden days.

“For the EPRDF, state ownership of land and an emphasis on group rights were the logical culmination of the ‘national questions’ of the Student Movement and the armed struggle that followed” says Ato Mehari. Since its ascent to power, the TPLF has been the landlord of the country and very busy robbing fertile lands in Gambella and other parts of the country and selling it to the highest bidders. “All the land and rights for oppressed nationalities” never happened. Global land grabbing found a haven under the TPLF’s government that forcefully evicted innumerable communities from their ancestry land with little compensation and in turn sold the land to the highest bidders. The TPLF used land 1) as political tool 2) for finance generation 3) displacement of “undesirables” 4) disenfranchisement of political opponents, etc.,... This isn’t and has never been “the logical culmination of the ‘national questions’ of the Student Movement and frankly, it only reveals Ato Mehari’s utter ignorance about the ESM.

Again Ato Mehari thinks “Ethiopia seems now to be in a post-EPRDF-dominated era”. It really is in a “post TPLF dominated era”. The 2nd election of PM Abiyeh Ahmed as the leader of the EPRDF at the 11th congress and resounding defeat of Dr. Debre Tsion reveals where the TPLF is in the coalition. It would have been instructive if Ato Mehari further elaborated on how the development of a post TPLF dominated era came about, what mistakes were done and the way forward. To this TPLF predicament Ato Mehari says “Ethiopia seems now to be in a post-EPRDF-dominated era, but without strong institutions” furthermore he writes “ The security sector, including the military, is timorous, more reticent to act than ever.” This unveiled desire of his to prod the security/army for its usual slaughter of the people is unfathomable. “They remain apprehensive and prone to fragmentation if not insulated from the political schisms of the ruling party and ethnicity based political mobilizations” he concludes. But what is this statement based on? It can’t just be because Dr. Abiyeh is the new PM, implementing reforms and widening the political space to include the opposition parties

into the nation's polity. Or his call to "break the dividing walls and build the bridge ". Ato Mehari shows an unprecedented level of denial of TPLF's reduced stature in the EPRDF and he could have been more instructive if he examined what led to these changes. This, at least is expected from an astute political commentator like him.

"Developmental State (DS) reverses the traditional capitalist conception of the respective roles of the public and private sector in the economy" says Ato Mehari. After the split in the TPLF party and Ato Meles' political victory, he began fully to articulate his own vision of the "democratic developmental state." When the TPLF declared it is a developmental state however, it really meant that it has developed and enriched itself. Large trade organizations, gold mines , large scale agricultural enterprises (from land forcefully grabbed/confiscated by the TPLF from the natives in the area) are now in the hands of the TPLF. The DS as practiced by the TPLF in Ethiopia meant developing and enriching the party and its cronies . Officials of the corrupt TPLF party have been busy robbing the country blind over the years and recent reports of capital flight out of Ethiopia to foreign banks is one the highest in Africa.

"Within the EPRDF, the hardcore ideology of the Developmental State and sovereignty comes from TPLF" says Ato Mehari and now that the TPLF is diminished in the EPRDF, all hell is going to break or has broken loose . He questions Ethiopia's neutrality in matters of international relations and cites the policies that changed or will change among which "the new Eritrea /Ethiopia relationship; the degree of Ethiopia's policy sovereignty in international relations; increasingly getting closer to the Saudi-led bloc; Egypt and Gulf countries ..putting the Horn of Africa under their sphere of influence; the high moral and legal ground on GERD being lost both internationally and regionally; Uganda, South Sudan, DRC, Burundi backpedaling on their pledge to sign the Comprehensive Framework Agreement for managing the Nile basin."

Frankly, it's too early to tell how things will progress under the new EPRDF on these matters and give a reasonable perspective.

Ato Mehari's advice/criticism for the "EPRDF" should be changed to advice/criticism for the "TPLF" and his statements would make sense if we read them as follows : 'No useful purpose will be served by dwelling on TPLF's past mistakeswe need to search for new common ground for a (genuine)consensus-based federal system...closure for many TPLFites hurt by past violations is paramount so that they can play an active role in the future of Ethiopia TPLF leaders and supporters need to reject both defeatist siege mentality, prevent any isolationist tendencies, and above all avoid infantile optimistic ideas... TPLF (should conduct) sober analysis, strategic foresight, and a forward-looking stance (and) could at least save the country, if not also the TPLF (insertion and italics mine).

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<https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/10/03/the-old-eprdf-is-dead-can-its-system-be-saved-five-steps-to-save-the-federation/>