

Assessing the One Year of Abiy's Premiership

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”
(Marx)

That in the year that passed since his rise to premiership, Abiy has accomplished great things, notably in the political field, is undeniable. However, it is equally true that he has bumped up against stubborn hurdles and, in some cases, has unintentionally unleashed destructive forces that were suppressed by the previous regime.

Among the great achievements, those that particularly stand out are: (1) the offering, in lieu of the divisive and discriminatory ethnonationalist ideology of the previous government, of a new vision emphasizing the unity and sovereignty of Ethiopia; (2) the promise and initial implementation of a democratic government fully committed to the realization of an all-embracing prosperity; (3) the unconditional freeing of all political prisoners; (4) the lifting of restrictions (it is true with some exceptions, as in the case of protests over Addis Ababa) on the rights of free speech, peaceful assembly and association; (5) the bringing to an end of the hegemonic rule of the TPLF; (6) the redirecting of the no-war-no-peace situation with Eritrea toward a peaceful and cooperative path; (7) the implementation of some serious efforts to reform institutions in the direction of good governance and accountability. By all accounts, the realization of these remarkable reforms in such a short time and under adverse conditions is an impressive achievement. I say without any reservation that Abiy deserves a resounding “congratulations”!

As would be expected from any attempt to change a country as complex and problem-ridden as Ethiopia, Abiy has also faced challenges that are significant to the point of tarnishing his achievements and slightly diminishing his popularity. His original confidence and unbounded optimism on the great things that he, his party, and the Ethiopian people can accomplish are largely responsible for the setbacks. Under his reassuring and uplifting vision, most people lost sight of the deep and numerous problems besieging Ethiopia after the 27 years of the divisive, corrupt, and ethnic-centered rule of the TPLF. Accordingly, one would reach a more balanced and realistic assessment of Abiy's achievements if one carefully separates the hurdles that he has inherited from the previous regime from those he himself created as a result of his idealistic vision as well as the steps he did not take to ward off problems issuing from the introduced reforms.

Inherited Impediments

A persistent complaint against Abiy's government is the inability to prevent massive displacements of people, often preceded by bloody conflicts between ethnically diverse people sharing a regional space. Yet, blaming Abiy for these setbacks is a misplaced assessment in that it is a one-sided view. True, the protection of peace and the basic rights of people is the major responsibility of the state, but with the proviso that one could assert that Abiy inherited a country that was in a state of relative peace. Need I remind critics that a year ago, amid continuous protests and uprisings, Ethiopia was on the verge of a bloody civil war?

The difference between then and now is not that Abiy failed to safeguard peace, which was never real, but that he resents using the repressive methods of the previous government, partly because of his democratic commitments, partly because he has not yet a firm control over the repressive apparatus of the state. A year ago, the desire to harm and displace ethnically different people was already there, but unable to manifest openly owing to the repressive nature of the government. Moreover, the main focus of the protests a year ago targeted the removal of the TPLF, less so ethnically alien people, as unity was perceived as necessary to achieve the goal. Now that the dictatorial rule of the TPLF has collapsed and is replaced by a government that tries to take seriously its democratic commitments, the perceived contradiction, essentially fueled by extremist groups, between different ethnic groups living in the same region has moved from secondary to primary contradiction.

Another inherited hurdle has to do with the attempt to carry out far-reaching reforms of the state by relying essentially on the structure put in place by the previous government as well as on cadres and officials that served the same government. Naturally, this "old wine in new bottles" policy of change severely limits the spread and deepening of reforms. One might argue that Abiy would have avoided this obstacle had he appealed to competent and reformist people outside his party. Yes, but the whole question is to know whether this attempt to bypass the EPRDF would not have undermined his own position as head of the government. Whether one likes it or not, the EPRDF is at present the only party capable of running the central government and regional states. Any attempt to circumvent it will certainly translate in a chaotic situation that can easily generate into open conflicts between various ethnic groups. Abiy would put himself in a much worse situation if he antagonized the cadres and officials of the EPRDF, not to mention the fact that he would deprive himself of the only instrument by which he could introduce a modicum of change in a relatively peaceful manner.

Among the inherited hurdles, one that must be kept at the forefront is the complicating factor arising from the fact that the TPLF was forced to retreat in its own regional stronghold but was not completely defeated. To all appearances, it is still engaged in the task of undermining Abiy's government by using various means in the hope of regaining its previous hegemonic position. The trouble is that all those diverse groups opposing Abiy for various reasons, including the extremists inside and outside the EPRDF, can count on the financial and military support of the TPLF. In the eyes of the TPLF, nothing works better for its eventual return to the pinnacle of power than the proliferation of groups subverting the government from inside, notably by challenging its ability to maintain peace among the various ethnic groups.

Last but not least, the appalling state of the economy remains the major strangler that Abiy inherited from the previous government. The peaceful implementation of reforms in a situation characterized by high unemployment, especially among young people, severe shortage of hard currency and essential goods, high rate of inflation, low wages, and all this combined with abhorrent wastages, rampant corruption, and illegal enrichment of the few, is little liable to reduce the tensions running through the various strata of Ethiopian society. This deep-seated discontent over the lack of economic advancement as well as over unequal access to opportunities is the very substance that feeds on extremism, in particular in the form of rising tension between ethnic groups. The reason for the rise of tensions is that a time of change is perceived as a time of opportunity, and so ignites competition over scarce resources. The dichotomy them/us flowing from ethnicism, to the extent that it construes people as aliens, comes in handy to justify their displacement and the grabbing of their possessions.

New Complications

The fact that the Oromo people, in particular the youth, have been decisively instrumental in the overthrow of the hegemony of the TPLF, the fact also that the initiative and the leadership of the change came from members of the Oromo wing of the governing coalition, namely, the ODP, led immediately to the interpretation that the Oromo elite had finally seized power in Ethiopia. Even though from the get-go Abiy emphasized Ethiopianness and presented himself more as the Prime Minister of all Ethiopians than the leader of an ethnic group, the image of the upper strata of Oromo people replacing the hegemony of the Tigrean elite was not only created, but was also widely shared by Oromo elites, regardless of their political affiliations.

It is my contention that, of all the dangers threatening Ethiopia, this hegemonic ambition of Oromo elites is by far the most perilous both for the continuation of reforms and the maintenance of peace. The ambition takes us back where we were for the last 27 years and its outcome, namely, the rise of the whole country against the political and economic supremacy of the TPLF. Simply put, this longing for supreme control of Oromo elites, unless it is quickly curtailed, will bring to a halt whatever remains of the reformist will, as those in power will be consumed in the task of protecting their new-found supremacy, which they can do so only by turning to a dictatorial form of government animated by a retaliatory intent.

A recent sign of things to come is the position of Oromo elites on the status of Addis Ababa. The call for Addis Ababa to be integrated into the Oromo regional state regardless of what its inhabitants think and in contravention to the Constitution guaranteeing the autonomy and self-governing rights of the federal capital does no more than reflect a burgeoning tendency to impose one's own view, not because it is right, but because it is the prerogative of the winning party, just as did the TPLF during its 27 years of dictatorial rule. I see no path to reform unless Abiy and his followers decidedly combat this rising domineering tendency among Oromo elites. This is the time to say with Marx, "history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce."

According to many activists and leaders of opposition parties, the major source of Ethiopia's numerous problems is the existing system of ethnic federalism. They add that no reform will bear

its intended fruits so long as ethnic federalism is not done away with or significantly altered. In other words, the explanation for the difficulties that Abiy is facing in his attempt to reform the Ethiopian society is his reluctance to take the bull of ethnic federalism by the horns and replaces it by a political system centered on citizenship rather than ethnicity. As tempting as this solution is, it is heedless of the deep-seated nature of ethnic identity in Ethiopia. Instead of strengthening Abiy, such a proposal weakens his standing in his own party when it is well known that the support of his party is essential for the continuance of his premiership. On the other hand, however, it is also true that Abiy cannot implement a pan-Ethiopian agenda if he is reduced to being just a chief of an ethnic group, whatever the importance of the group may be.

All this reveals a tenacious political conundrum made of two incompatible tendencies: pan-Ethiopianism, on the one hand, ethnicity, on the other. Any solution that reasons in terms of either/or is awfully inadequate to the challenge at hand. The proposal to simply eliminate the ethnic territories and states is little realistic given the entrenched nature of ethnic identity, which is also reflective of definite localized interests. Assuming that it is possible to put in place in today's Ethiopia a government capable of going against the ethnically demarcated territories, the suggested solution would require the use of violent and totalitarian means, not to mention the fact that its success in pacifying the country would be anything but assured. On the other hand, those who rule out pan-Ethiopianism in favor of the preservation of the existing ethnic federalism fail to admit the untenability of the present situation: without the cultural and political sustenance of a shared identity and common destiny, the fragmentation along ethnic lines, in addition to promising more conflicts and displacements of people, will increasingly weaken and finally terminate the unity of the country, an outcome that will certainly put the entire Horn of Africa to fire and blood.

Needed, therefore, is the path of moderation, the very one that combines the imperative of national unity with the reality of ethnic territories and identifications. As I have already suggested in several write-ups, the moderate solution advocates the framing of institutional devices in a political system in which centripetal forces (national institutions and symbols) counter centrifugal forces (ethnicity). While large autonomy and self-rule should satisfy ethnicity, federal political institutions making national positions dependent on moderation should encourage unity. One pertinent way of balancing centripetal and centrifugal forces is the creation of a presidential figure with large political and symbolic meanings. Among other prerogatives, the president could, for instance, nominate the prime minister, who then assumes the function of a conductor generating majority support from an ethnically diverse parliamentary representation. If, unlike regional positions that depend on regional elections, the election of the president emanates from universal suffrage and is decided by majority vote of all people from all ethnic regions, some such arrangement strongly encourages moderation, but also creates national figures. Universal suffrage and majority vote, in addition to promoting the expression of individual rights in conjunction with group rights, generate national political figures with moderate views, since candidates for the presidential office will have to become attractive to voters outside their ethnic groups.

Whatever be the solution deemed appropriate to achieve the imperative balance between national unity and ethnic identity, one must never lose sight of the need to conform reforms to the concrete conditions of the country. Any discrepancy between the projected reforms and the actual conditions of the country will only add complications that can be as challenging as the structural problems. When political leaders raise hopes that they cannot fulfil, they exasperate existing frustrations, thereby preparing the ground for the spread of extremist messages. For instance, democracy is a word that Ethiopian political leaders, activists, observers, and analysts profusely use but understand in different ways. On top of being presented as a magical panacea to all of Ethiopia's problems, democracy signifies nothing operational, as it is divorced of the concrete conditions prevailing in the country. As a result, it translates into an attitude of negativity among educated elites and the people at large, with the consequence that they would settle for nothing else but the ideal or the absolute.

This high-bar approach easily forgets that the democratic mind is not an innate disposition, but a state of mind that is acquired through a protracted process of learning fraught with ups and downs and realized through a piece-by-piece build-up of institutional fences against the natural human, as witnessed by the long and zigzagging history of the democratization of Western countries. Like in other African countries, the problem in Ethiopia is that Ethiopians do not build up; instead, they want to import from the West the already-made with the intent of implementing it as is in a completely different context.

Is it then surprising if, wearing an attire that is not tailor-made, Ethiopians constantly stumble in their new-found freedom? From hate speech through revengeful taunts to extremist threats, the whole array of political infantilism is spitting its poison in the hope of dragging the people into its crusade of hate. So long as this new-found freedom, which can only be crude because it has not yet learned to put limitations on itself, is confined to marginal groups, the danger remains minimal. Unfortunately, left unchecked, the virus could spread and reach the people at large: this is all the more probable the more we keep in mind that the people of Ethiopia have never breathed the air of freedom nor experienced any form of self-rule. This is to say that reformers in Ethiopia will alleviate their problems if they think of democracy, not in the absolute, but in evolutionary terms by placing protective limitations until such time it can regulate itself.

Messay Kebede

University of Dayton

<https://udayton.academia.edu/MessayKebede>