

# Deaf Ear! Blind Eye! -Why Ethiopia's Opposition must seize a golden opportunity for fundamental change.

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Ethiopian Soldiers killed at least 15 people on Monday in Chelenko

## Part II of II

In part I, I argued that the diplomatic and donor community can no longer afford to keep dead silent while innocent Ethiopians are being murdered, displaced, dispossessed, impoverished; and while hundreds of thousands of the country's youth are forced to flee their homeland.

The primary purpose of this commentary is this. While it is legitimate for us Ethiopians to demand that the donor and diplomatic community side with the Ethiopian people; it is morally and ethically wrong for the country's divided and dysfunctional opposition to remain divided; to operate in silos; to slander and undermine one another; and to fail to offer the Ethiopian people a better alternative to the police and undemocratic state and government. Simply opposing the TPLF is not enough. In any case and by any measurement the TPLF/EPRDF dictatorial and repressive state has made itself irrelevant.

The ethnic conflict between Oromo and Somali Ethiopians who have lived side by side peacefully, reveals the pitfalls of ethnic-federalism that the TPLF and its cohorts still support. More than 700,000 Oromo have been displaced. Ethiopia is encircled and threatened. On January 17, 2018. The Wall Street Journal wrote a provocative piece that should concern the regime in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian opposition; and more important, the Ethiopian people.

It is the people who have the greatest stake in the development and use of their river resources and lands. **"Troubled Waters: Egypt and Ethiopia Wrangle Over Nile Dam"** by the Wall Street Journal on January 17, 2018, paints a dire picture in that it presents Ethiopia as an emerging rival to Egypt concerning control of the Nile River to which the Abbay River (Blue Nile) contributes more than 80 percent of the total inflow to the Nile. It is true that "hundreds of millions of people" depend on the Nile River. To date, the biggest beneficiaries have been Egypt and Sudan. Sudan supports Ethiopia's legitimate rights to build the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) while Egypt continues to insist that its "natural and historical rights" must be respected by Ethiopia. Egyptian authorities continue to insist that 'Egypt cannot live without the Nile.' I do not know of any Ethiopian who insists that Egypt should be deprived of this essential natural resource. The question is equitable and fair use Ethiopia's water resources for the benefit of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people. It is indefensible to deprive Ethiopia of its rights.

Warmongering is not the solution. The most viable solution is negotiation through diplomacy. In the meantime, the regime in Addis Ababa must work much harder than ever before to pay

attention to the hopes and aspirations of the Ethiopian people. Releasing all political prisoners, opening-up political, civic and religious space and creating a robust program of empowering and generating employment for Ethiopia's youth without delay is among the right steps. These steps will help unify Ethiopia's 105 million people against foreign aggression.

Focus on Ethiopia's youth is a must. Because large number of youth continue to flee in droves. They flee for two fundamental reasons: the lack of meaningful employment opportunities in Ethiopia and the perceived demand for migrant services in foreign countries; and the oppressive and suffocating political, social and religious environment they face constantly at home. These pull and push factors remain intact and are structural and systemic.

On December 29, 2017, the Associated Press reported a massive program of expulsions of Ethiopian and other migrants from Saudi Arabia, reminiscent of what happened in 2013/2014. The latest deportations began on November 11, 2017 and continue. AP reports that the kingdom has detained around 250,000 people violating its residency laws in the crackdown, with approximately 50,000 already forcibly flown out of the country. Of those who entered the country illegally, 72 percent were from Yemen and 26 percent were Ethiopians. An estimated **400,000 Ethiopian migrants** had been living in Saudi Arabia."

Adding insult to injury, Ethiopians expelled from Saudi Arabia report harsh and inhumane treatment by the Saudis. They "were robbed" of their minimal possessions. The AP quotes some returning to Addis Ababa that "Saudi police officers" took their monies and "shared" the loot "between them. Some of the returnees said they saw compatriots being shot and wounded when they tried to escape police roundups...prison cells were like toilets." An Ethiopian deportee in this wave, Sadiq Ahmed, who was detained for more than ten days, is quoted saying "As if this was not enough, we were robbed of our belongings. I came here with nothing. I know lots of people who went insane because of this torment."

Human Rights Watch had documented serious violations of the rights of Ethiopian migrants in Saudi Arabia. The report had no effect on either Saudi or Ethiopian authorities. The latter failed to express a modicum of national outrage at the savage treatments Ethiopians.

Ethiopian authorities also failed to denounce President Trump's unthinkable and despicable characterization of all Black Africa as "shithole countries." The African Union took a principled stand by demanding retraction and apology by the American President. The failure of the regime in Addis Ababa to defend the honor and dignity of the country it continues to rule and the people it suppresses is hardly surprising. A regime that abuses its citizens at home cannot be expected to defend citizens' rights abroad. Only the unity of the Ethiopian people and their defense of freedom and rights influence the global system.

Ethiopian migrant repression and expulsions continue. Authorities say that more than 14,000 migrants have been deported since mid-November and 70,000 have returned voluntarily. The International Office of Migration (IOM) says the number that has left forcibly or voluntarily since the amnesty period ended in June has reached 96,000. Saudi Arabia ordered all undocumented migrants to leave voluntarily in March, an order later extended until June. "I stayed in Saudi Arabia for five years just to support my family and other siblings," said deportee Fozia Omar. She spent one month in prison. "We have suffered a lot. I would like to beg my brothers and sisters not to repeat the mistake we already made, in the name of Allah."

IOM continues to defend the rights of migrants. "The number of returnees could rise even higher in the coming weeks," adding that around \$30 million is needed to cover their immediate needs, including transportation for many of the most vulnerable."

Those forced to return face the grim reality that there are no jobs. Following the slaying of 30 Ethiopians in Libya, a young man was asked if he contemplated to take risks to go to Europe via Libya. "Yes, I plan to do that soon. It makes no difference to remain to die or die in Libya." Ethiopia's youth never stopped their treks to escape poverty and oppression at home. In Libya, they face modern slavery. In Saudi Arabia, they face expulsion etc. This will continue as long as the root causes that push them from their homeland remain unresolved. Change is urgent.

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) won't change. The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) that the TPLF dominates is mutating, conflict and suspicion-ridden and by its own admission "sinking." Citizens do not trust it. They have no confidence. It has failed to meet their basic needs. On December 20/2017 the EPRDF "admitted that the party was facing a gradual & widening "mistrust" & "suspicion" among the four major parties that make up the EPRDF. Evidence shows that the EPRDF can't address the root causes of the popular uprising without questioning the premise of its ethnic and linguistic foundation and the ideological lingua franca of "revolutionary democracy." An endless cycle of conversation without public input and participation won't amount to anything.

### **What then should be done?**

The people of Ethiopia are far ahead than the internal or external opposition. Opposition groups are obliged to unify their forces and present a viable alternative. Together, they possess a vast array of experience, knowledge and expertise to lead the country. However, the anchor for fundamental change is within Ethiopia and not in the Diaspora. The political opposition within Ethiopia—for example, the Blue Party, the All-Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), Medrek and others must reach out to one another and create a unified bloc fast. They should take advantage of the opportunity that emanates from frictions within the EPRDF. Here, I tend to agree with inside observers that the rifts within the EPRDF, especially between the TPLF and its allies on the one hand; and ANDM and OPDO on the other are real. Change champions within these two parties must be encouraged and supported.

Therefore, opposition groups, especially domestic anchors, have a golden opportunity to exploit the rift within the governing party. Success depends on confidence and trust building measures.

### **Why is this urgent?**

Below is a diagnosis of the compelling reasons why immediate action is required.

#### **Ethiopia's Youth is in Revolt and Dying**

The regime is rejected by the vast majority of the Ethiopian people, especially its youth population. This demographic group constitutes more than 65 percent of Ethiopia's 105 million people. Ethiopia is unable to create the required two and a half million jobs per year. College educated youth compete for limited jobs; and these limited jobs are granted on the basis of ethnicity and party affiliation. This is the reason for the trust deficit in the country. Youth is alienated from the government and its institutions.

Ethiopia's new generation is a vital social capital that, if harnessed well, would contribute substantially in growing the economy. It is also an important bridge between and among the country's diverse population. The freedom to attend any college or university in any region in an environment of safety is a fundamental human right. It is virtually impossible to learn in an environment of hostility, hatred and fear.

Large numbers of students of Oromo and Amhara origin are frightened for their lives. Those attending colleges in Gondar and other locations are cordoned off and their movements restricted by TPLF managed forces including the Agazi. This is the first time in Ethiopia's modern history that students fear for their lives because of their ethnicity.

Ethiopia is deeply polarized. Targeted and selective killing of students and other innocent Ethiopians is a form of terrorism. Ethnic-cleansing leads to genocide. The ongoing interethnic conflicts between Oromo and Somali Ethiopians resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians; the destruction of massive property; the displacements of hundreds of thousands of citizens, especially Oromos; and the deepening animosity and instability. These assaults make Ethiopia vulnerable to external threat.

The right of any Ethiopian to feel safe and to live in any part of the country has been degraded severely, and in some areas irreparably. This tragedy will continue as long as ethnic identity defines citizenship. This is among the reasons why the public's trust in the EPRDRDF is degraded beyond repair.

- It is degraded because it is unable to address the root causes of Ethiopia's multifaceted problems.

- It is degraded because it does not listen to the grievances of the population.
- It is degraded because it is anti-democratic and anti-the rule of law
- It is degraded because its solution is to strengthen state security etc. etc. etc.

The most recent assessment of Ethiopia's security situation by the governing party leaves the root causes for peaceful protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions intact. Peaceful protests have continued since November 2015. More than 1,000 Oromo and Amhara were killed. More than 11,000 were arrested. No one really knows the number of disappearances.

The most recent flares are, in fact a continuation of unresolved grievances. On December 11, 2017, federal troops commanded by Tigrean officers massacred 16 innocent civilians in the town of Celenko, Oromia. Of those murdered, five were from the same family. Reports show that these federal forces came to the town and region uninvited. We do not know for sure who instigated these massacres; but someone should be held accountable for crimes against humanity.

This latest massacre triggered outrage and condemnation from a cross-section of Ethiopians, especially from the President of the Oromo regional state, Lemma Megersa. To my knowledge no governing party or federal official has been held accountable for the latest massacre. It saddens me to note that the norm in Ethiopia is for federal forces to massacre innocent people; and for the world community and for ordinary Ethiopians to move on as if nothing has happened.

### **Ethiopian Human Life Lost Meaning**

Ironically, those who inflict the greatest pain on ordinary citizens cry foul and turn the blame on someone else. The newly elected chairman of the restructured TPLF, Debretsion, wrote in early November this: "The current security situation in Ethiopia is very disconcerting. The country is moving from one crisis to another. Loss of confidence that EPRDF may not be able to solve the crisis greatly confounds the concern." I challenge him to tell us who caused this loss of confidence?

I recall during the uprising in the Amhara region in the summer of 2015, Debretsion had warned the Amhara population that the TPLF-security and defense possessed overwhelming military power to "crush" the popular uprising. His party's command posts were responsible for the massacres of more than 1,000 innocent Amhara and Oromo youth; and for the disappearances of tens of thousands.

It is true that Ethiopia's security situation has been deteriorating since then. The question is who is the culprit? Certainly, someone in the federal system is making a decision? When federal troops are involved, the order comes from those who control these troops. If anyone knows who is behind the massacres and the insecurity in the country, Debretsion should be among them.

The supremacy of the state and the government in Ethiopia is equal to the supremacy of the TPLF. The urgent on again and off again meeting of the Executive Committee of the EPRDF revealed deep fissures within the ruling party. For the first time in the party's history, hostility, anger and frustration were expressed by members and leaders of the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). These two parties represent more than 75 percent of the Ethiopian population.

The 36 member EPRDF Executive Committee lacks proportional or democratic representation, the same is true of the rubber stamp parliament and other federal institutions. To the shock and dismay of the TPLF, the leaders of OPDO and ANDM demanded the following:

- 1.An end to TPLF (Tigrean) hegemony over state and government institutions, including higher officers in the defense, security and intelligence apparatus
- 2.An end to TPLF (Tigrean) monopoly over the national economy, the budget and natural resources, and
- 3.An end to the marginalization of the Oromo and Amara people

These demands for fairness and equity were not received well by the TPLF that represents a minority ethnic group; but that still dominates the party, state and government. TPLF hegemony over core political institutions, including telecommunications, security, defense,

the judiciary etc., has enabled a shamelessly disproportionate number of Tigreans to dominate the national economy.

This domination has also contributed to Ethiopia's national insecurity. The glaring gap in incomes, wealth and other assets has made Ethiopia vulnerable to external threats.

The harm of this zero-sum game emanating from TPLF monopoly on the vast majority of the population is glaring and consequential in terms national security, peace, stability and shared prosperity. Therefore, public resentment against the TPLF is at an all-time high and deep. It is the core component of the current crisis. Tragically for Ethiopia, the new TPLF leadership does not see it that way.

Far from expressing remorse for the massacres by federal, Agazi and other forces, the displacement of more than 700,000 Oromo nationals is, many contend, caused by the Liyu police "established and equipped by Tigrean generals." Debretsion says unabashedly that "There are unfounded claims that there is a force orchestrating [the internal crisis] from behind" to "sabotage our security institutions," and that the unfounded propaganda of "hegemony of TPLF and Tigreans are being greatly exploited." It is disingenuous to accuse those who stand for justice, equality, the rule of law and democracy as "saboteurs." The sooner such venomous and irresponsible languages are stopped the better for Ethiopia's national security; and for the wellbeing of all Ethiopians including Tigreans.

Exclusionary and suffocating governance continues to lead the entire country into a very dangerous direction. If the TPLF continues to dominate it will be a coup de-d'état. Among others, continued domination in a new form will delegitimize the ANDM and the OPDO; and nullify gains.

What options do these parties have?

1. First, the ANDM and OPDO should not be alarmed by the threat emanating from the newly minted and aggressive TPLF leadership. They need to stand together for the common good.

In addition, those who stand for fundamental changes within and outside the EPRDF should:

1. Preserve and defend their organizational identities; solidify their unity and collaboration in all areas, including security, defense and intelligence.

2. Reject TPLF attempts to take over Oromo and Amhara media with the intent of centralizing further all communications and media and presenting a one sided and biased TPLF narrative that is harmful to all Ethiopians.

3. Reject TPLF interference and undue pressure to reinstate former or TPLF sympathizers and loyalists; and cleanse their organizations of moles and agents whose primary loyalty is to the TPLF.

4. Show the courage and determination to side with their vast constituents (the people) and to reach out to opposition groups within and outside of Ethiopia.

5. Demand accountability for the recent massacres and call on the Prime Minister to explain to the Ethiopian people why the massacres took place in the first place and who is accountable for the deaths of innocent people; the destruction of property; and the razing of homes.

6. Show statesmanship by demanding the cessation of killings and the cordoning of colleges and universities.

7. Welcome the release of political leaders, most notably, Professor Merera Gudina and demand immediate release of the thousands of political prisoners who still suffer in Ethiopia's jails.

8. Be bold enough and farsighted enough to take a position with regard to opening-up Ethiopia's political, civic and spiritual space so that the democratization process severely restrained by the regime is eased.

9. Collectively demand respect for human rights of each and every Ethiopian citizen; freedom of the press, association, assembly, movement and peaceful protests.

10. Speak with one voice and together approach Western governments, especially the United States and inform them that Ethiopians wish to prevent civil war, the Balkanization of Ethiopia and genocide; and advance multiparty democracy.

11. Together, exercise leadership by informing Ethiopia's foreign friends that they are committed to substantive democratic changes and to the formation of an All-Inclusive government in Ethiopia.

12.Together, reject Egyptian warmongering and call for a negotiated settlement of the dispute over Abbay waters without compromising Ethiopia's national interests in harnessing its waters for the benefit of all its people.

13.Together, work towards national dialogue and consensus with regard to Ethiopia's future and the shared prosperity of its citizens.

By the same token, those of us residing outside Ethiopia must support those who are struggling for fundamental changes and not gimmick reforms within Ethiopia. At minimum, we should refrain from demeaning or badmouthing those who wish to end TPLF hegemony once and for all.

Long Live Ethiopia!!

Long Live Unity with Diversity!!

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