

# Ethiopia and EPRDF: reform or perish

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*From the very outset, the fundamental obstacle to democratizing Ethiopia has been the lack of democracy within the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) because an undemocratic entity cannot act as a democratizing agency. And democratizing the EPRDF entails ending the present practice of standing its pyramid on its apex instead of its base, write **Leenco Lata and Hassan Hussein**.*

The root cause of Ethiopia's ongoing political crisis is the steady loss of legitimacy by the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. However, neither the ruling party nor its detractors are seriously talking about the root causes of the growing crisis in the country. Without this diagnosis, the ruling party's efforts to tackle the crises would go to naught. The ruling party came to power almost three decades ago espousing two legitimating narratives. First, promoting peace and stability by ending the armed conflicts then underway in different parts of the country by various insurgent groups. Second, instituting a peculiar type of federation in order to level the hierarchical ranking of the country's nationalities (ethnic groups). Some years into its tenure, the ruling coalition added a third legitimating narrative: alleviating poverty by promoting rapid state-led economic development – the so called developmentalism. It is the practical inversion of the first two and the unexpected consequences of the third that steadily eroded EPRDF's legitimacy culminating in a full-fledged crisis for the country. Let us look at how this unfolded one after the other.

## **Promoting peace and stability**

It is no secret to anyone that the ruling coalition aspired to indefinitely rule Ethiopia. It is this desire that practically clashed with the overall agenda of promoting and preserving peace and stability leading to its total inversion. Remaining in power indefinitely necessitated the policy of constricting the legal political space in order to avert losing political power through a democratic process. This policy also hampered the work of the

private media and civil society groups that are not somehow affiliated or subservient to the ruling party. As the result, these mechanisms for identifying and dealing with societal grievances steadily narrowed and were shut completely in due course.

This strategy worked alongside another one: denying potential insurgents a safe haven anywhere in the Horn of Africa region from which to challenge its monopoly of violence. This strategy drove the regime to extend the country's security perimeter to the Indian Ocean in the East and Darfur in the West. Achieving this aim required successfully intimidating, appeasing or cowing the concerned neighboring powers – with the exception of Eritrea. But Eritrea proved an inefficient safe haven for insurgents for a number of reasons that need not detain us here.

Successfully obstructing the expression of societal grievances both within and outside the legal system appeared to fulfill the ruling coalition's aspiration to indefinitely rule Ethiopia. That is why the uprisings of the last two years came to it as a total surprise when it saw no enemies far and near that could challenge its supremacy. In reality, this uprising is nothing else but the eruption of pent up societal grievances. This turn of events grew into an unexpected threat to the tenure of the ruling coalition in one surprising way: lacking all alternative avenues, societal expression of grievances rebounded into the ranks of the ruling coalition. As the result, the Oromo member of the coalition, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), started behaving like a quasi-opposition by echoing the grievances of its supposed constituency.

And this development was compounded by a factor innate to any force aspiring to pose as the sole promoter and preserver of peace and stability. Such a force needs both internal and external causes of instability in order to justify its fundamental *raison d'être*. And the ruling coalition postured as such a force not only domestically but also in the Horn region at large. Consequently, its opponents have routinely alleged that the ruling coalition is behind the incidents of inter-communal and inter-religious violence that has punctuated the country's history in the past decades. Similarly, the allegation that the ruling party is in cahoots with the Islamic insurgency ravaging neighboring Somalia, the Al-Shabaab, stems from the same speculation. These allegations have now become increasingly credible as the result of the ongoing violence between the Ethiopian Somali Regional State and the neighboring Oromia Regional State in which a state sponsored militia, with the support and acquiescence of the federal army and security high command, is openly involved. Perhaps this action was originally intended to discredit and cow the OPDO but it had the direct opposite effect.

As part of its divide-and-rule strategy, the EPRDF coalition exploited any traditional and historical inter-communal tension wherever it existed or fomented new ones where and when it didn't. Stoking the traditional tension supposedly marring relations between the Oromo (the most populous nationality) and the Amhara (the second most populous) happens to be the most important such ploy. The EPRDF aspired to indefinitely rule Ethiopia by exploiting the animosities between the elites from these two communities more than anything else. This pivotal leverage, however, unraveled when the two patched up their relationship in the last couple of years. It was at this stage that violence erupted between the Oromo and their Ethiopian Somali neighbors – thereby fuelling and corroborating the suspicion that the ruling coalition must be behind it as it alone benefited from the mayhem.

As the result of the developments discussed in this section, the EPRDF coalition that came to power promising peace and stability was increasingly seen as the main cause of instability thereby systematically eroding its legitimacy. Meanwhile, societal grievances, lacking any other outlet, reverberated back into the ruling coalition – pitting its members against each other. The systematic suppression of political competition ended up ripping

apart the coalition – allowing some of its members to start behaving like an opposition group in order to address the grievances of their constituencies. With a sea of youth breathing down their necks, these parties could no longer play their designated primary function: Keeping their allocated constituencies in line.

### **Leveling national hierarchy**

Until the EPRDF came to power in 1991, the Amhara were considered as the dominant rulers of Ethiopia – this despite the presence of members of other nationalities in key governmental positions all the way to the top. The veracity of this perception should not detain us here for its very existence was sufficient to mobilize members of other nationalities in the struggle to undo it. And by the time the last supposedly Amhara-dominated regime was unseated in 1991, there were a dozen or so insurgent groups fighting toward this end. The most powerful of them was the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the creator and leader of the EPRDF coalition.

Ending the supposed Amhara domination was hence front and center when the EPRDF came to power and thus had to adopt the present form of federation in order to promote the equality of nations, nationalities and peoples. This agenda, however, was inverted by another one: recompensing Tigray and Tigreans for their disproportionate sacrifices in ending the previous order. In the early years of EPRDF rule, other Ethiopians acquiesced to Tigreans' occupying leading positions in government partly by recognizing their sacrifices in ending the previous order. However, there was no official or informal accounting system to determine when the debt that the other Ethiopians supposedly owed Tigray and Tigreans would be paid up.

Despite Tigreans vacating some of the leading positions in government in recent years, the allegation of Tigean domination persisted ultimately surfacing even within the EPRDF coalition. These other members of the coalition continued to be humiliated by their perception as agents of Tigrean domination in the eyes of their respective constituencies. This humiliation boiled over when a prominent TPLF leader publicly lambasted OPDO leaders for supposedly dragging their feet in implementing the so-called Master Plan to expand Ethiopia's capital at the expense of Oromos living in its environs. This action also triggered the initial massive Oromo protest in 2014 that erupted in opposition to the implementation of the Master Plan.

Before moving to the next issue, a few words are in order regarding the sensitive and complicated matter of recompensing Tigray and Tigreans for their supposed disproportionate sacrifices in the unseating the previous regime. One truth needs to be recognized in dealing with this matter: Two wrongs do not add up to a right. Hence, those who expected the EPRDF to hand over power by conceding defeat at fair and free elections soon after coming to power were definitely wrong for it was both unrealistic and unrealizable. Similarly, the EPRDF's posture to consider Ethiopia as a private booty captured on the battlefield is also wrong. Justice lies somewhere between these two stands and should seriously be sought by all concerned.

### **Promoting economic growth**

While the allegation of Tigrean dominance persisted, the EPRDF embarked on a determined campaign to alleviate poverty by promoting economic development at a fast rate with the state as the engine and manager of the growth. This came with another complication innate to periods of fast economic growth. By its very nature, economic growth produces both winners and losers as well as the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Thus, while some clearly benefit from the advantages made available by the economic policy, others start seeing themselves as the disadvantaged party. Even those whose situation has improved

somewhat are likely to harbor jealousy at those who have made a killing.

When advantage appears to favor some and others see themselves as disproportionately and persistently disadvantaged, inter-communal tensions perk up. And in Ethiopia this resentment has peaked. Again, the veracity of this favoritism does not matter, as its very perception suffices to fuel the anger and frustration of those who see themselves as disadvantaged. In Ethiopia today, Tigray and Tigreans are presently perceived as the major beneficiaries of whatever economic growth that happened in the past two decades. As a result, some Tigrean-owned properties and businesses have been targeted in different parts of the country during the ongoing protests.

### **No alternative to EPRDF**

The loss of legitimacy by the EPRDF stems primarily from its failure to reconcile its conflicting dual aspirations. Its declared aim of leveling the hierarchical ranking of nationalities ran up against and was practically negated by its determination to recompense Tigray and Tigreans. Combined with the policy of promoting speedy economic development, this fueled the allegation that economic growth disproportionately favored Tigray and Tigreans. The policy of promoting peace and stability also ran up against the other one of needing domestic and regional causes of insecurity in order to remain indispensable. The overall consequences of these developments is that today there is no group ready and able to immediately assume the reins of power replacing the EPRDF and ruling Ethiopia.

Hence, an incoming administration appears impossible without the involvement of the EPRDF. However, the involvement of the incumbent in a succeeding administration is unprecedented in the history of contemporary Ethiopia. Each past regime change entailed not just the loss of power by the incumbent but also its total demolition and subsequent demonization. Consequently, the absence of a group able and ready to repeat this process means that the involvement of elements of the EPRDF in the successor administration appears imperative.

The EPRDF has to regain legitimacy for even some of its elements to participate in the incoming administration. And this requires the following two very important measures: removing the aspirations that practically inverted its legitimating narratives; and introducing new faces from outside the EPRDF. In short, instituting meaningful reform within the EPRDF and the government at large isn't simply to the advantage of the country but also to the ruling party itself.

From the very outset, the fundamental obstacle to democratizing Ethiopia has been the lack of democracy within the EPRDF because an undemocratic entity cannot act as a democratizing agency. And democratizing the EPRDF entails ending the present practice of standing its pyramid on its apex instead of its base. Only after this modification is effected within the EPRDF would it be able to participate in democratic contestation in the external arena.

### **The challenge of instituting reform**

The Ethiopian political class has developed the culture of considering regime change only as a process of defeating, removing from power and demonizing the incumbent. Thereafter, the incoming group would freely restructure administration in order to reflect its interests and worldview. This allows it to carve a political space occupied strictly by itself and its allies. As the result, the habit innate to democracy of cooperating on some issues with other groups while competing with them on other matters has never been experienced. This mentality has to change for the country to move in a democratic direction. Instead, all stakeholders should learn how to share the political space even with those espousing opposing views.

Similarly, both the incumbent and its opponents must agree on two fundamental matters. First, the incumbent must accept that instituting some changes is necessary to preserve basic aspects of the existing order. Second, its opponents should likewise be willing to accept that preserving aspects of the existing order would ease the process of instituting reform. The end result would be a new order that all can live with despite disliking some of its aspects.

Having made the political arena its exclusive preserve for a quarter century, EPRDF is finding it difficult to walk its own talk. Only weeks after promising to open the democratic space and promoting national reconciliation, hardline elements within the ruling party resorted to declaring another state of emergency – only four months after the previous one was lifted. The reason is simple: EPRDF is finding it difficult to make a complete break with its own history. Despite talking at length about the factors behind its organizational paralysis, never has it managed to identify the root causes that are behind the impasse inside the ruling party as well as the country. Even in this eleventh hour, it is still behaving as though it is looking for some silver bullet or magic wand that would make the crises go away. And no such silver bullet or magic wand is out there.

For EPRDF to break out of its self-imposed cage, it has to first own up to its own role in creating the impasse and this need to go beyond the rhetoric of “oh, yes, we have weaknesses.” Speaking of reform is one thing. Reforming is altogether different. As long as the State of Emergency (SoE) is in effect, EPRDF’s talk of its desire to reform would remain unconvincing. Who would believe a regime that doesn’t respect its own constitution, supposedly the supreme law of the land, when it says it is going to reform? After all, legitimacy isn’t something one bestows on oneself – it is given to one by others. That is why if it is committed to reform, EPRDF should demonstrate its will to reform by rescinding the SoE, as being demanded by a wide spectrum of the public. If the SoE is made to survive in the next meeting of the parliament, in which it has total control, EPRDF can blame no one but itself for continuing chaos. Once the fact and threat of the SoE is removed, it has to take further confidence building measures. One such immediate measure is the removal of individuals responsible for the security sector as a goodwill measure. Another immediate measure is the formation of Informal Extraordinary Stabilization Bodies at both the federal and regional levels by involving some of the prominent members of the opposition. These bodies could help greatly in addressing the population and calming the situation to provide a conducive atmosphere for meaningful dialogue and reform. This ought to be coupled with reaching out to the opposition, both inside and outside of the country, with the express purpose of drawing up a comprehensive program of reform. Short of these measures, reversing the presently growing mood of despondency is simply impossible. In fact, any further dithering on the part of the ruling party would signal to the population that it is still beholden to its aspiration of ruling the country indefinitely and to this effect, it is prepared to turn the country into a bloodbath. The SoE is not a demonstration of the ruling party’s readiness for reform but a demonstration of its desire to suppress dissent at all costs. With a public that has been highly mobilized for the last three years, this is simply a recipe for disaster.