

TPLF (EPRDF)—HARDLY GOOD MIDWIFE FOR THE FUTURE DEMOCRATIC ETHIOPIA

By Genet Mersha, March 30, 2010

PART II

At the end of Part I of my article, *The People vs. TPLF—Tigray...Addis Ababa Scale up Defiance* of March 23, I closed with an idea from democratic law and legal precedents that voting is a form of free speech. This second part would pick up from there to state my reasons for denying my approval and support for the TPLF (EPRDF). Already the election environment is strained by shenanigans, widespread fears and undue pressure on voters by unfair and illegal vote canvassing. Widespread are ill-treatments, harassment and imprisonment of opposition candidates, party members and their supporters, so report news sources.

Inducing the governing party to such actions is the fact of the challenges to its nearly-year old power is becoming stiffer by the day. Interestingly, other than the above responses, I also see several amateurish efforts to score propaganda point. Last weekend, I read story that was terribly mangled, moving under different titles such as “*Stable Ethiopia needs int’l, regional support, European Parliament Foreign Affairs Spokesman*” (ENA); “*Stable Ethiopia now needs international and local support*” (aiga), “*Expect stability if Meles holds on Power*” (*Ethiopia-news.com*), a late coming government-sponsored web page. Zealots have recycled it with their vision.

For instance, that latter web site cut and pasted a copy of that article with the following quote above the title: “**If Meles holds on power in the parliamentary elections due this May, the world should expect the stability that he has brought to take deeper root**”, **European Parliament Foreign Affairs Spokesman.**” This gives the impression that the European Parliament either is endorsing or campaigning on behalf of the prime minister. What *Ethiopia-news.com* suppressed is a qualifier that states “**That is why, regardless of the electoral result, Ethiopia needs international backing.**” Speaking of the government as a body, the parliamentarian Charles Tannock concludes, “**Ethiopia’s leadership throughout the Horn of Africa could bring change in a part of the world that has largely been written off. It is time to give Ethiopia the diplomatic tools it needs.**” While the article may have tried to cut on both sides, undoubtedly it has suffered the misfortune of being used for propaganda purposes in two ways.

First, true that Charles Tannock is spokesperson for the Parliament’s foreign affairs committee. However, in his article that reflects his personal opinion as an activist in the European Conservative Reformist (ECR) movement, a tiny minority group within the Parliament, he was speaking neither on behalf of the foreign affairs committee, nor the Parliament to which he has no mandate. By the way, his extended article entitled *The Ethiopia Card* first appeared on *Project Syndicate* on 26 March, its reprint appearing on newscotsman.com on March 29. His view rightly reflects growing concern over stability in the Horn owing to tensions in Kenya, dictatorships in the Sudan, and Uganda and rising terrorist danger in death-land, anarchic Somalia, contributing to human insecurity globally.

If indeed latest testimony by Al Qaeda suspect in Saudi Arabia is reliable (*World Net Daily*, March 28), Ethiopia has already tasted the stings of death in cruel ways in recent blow up of its national carrier over Lebanon and the murder of its innocent citizens. All the more reason for the regime not to seek electoral gains through distortion of such an article, as if it were intended to give endorsement of TPLF (EPRDF)’s candidate, and despite the fact that the article clearly states “**regardless of the electoral result.**” Surely, Mr. Tannock can hardly escape blame for entertaining the notion that democracy is luxury for Ethiopians. To that effect he wrote, “Who can blame Ethiopians, surrounded by potential enemies, for giving priority to stability and order over Western-style democratic development?” Putting it mildly, not only is this heartlessly insensitive to Ethiopian aspirations for genuine democracy and freedom. It is also an insult.

A view on what the debate is being pushed to achieve

The five rounds of debates between the political parties have shown the ruling party’s audacity insinuating that a single party rule is necessity for Ethiopia, an idea that seems to gain currency from unlikely sources, as the latest *The Economist* seemed to show. Recall that it started the first debate complaining it has no partner in the opposition to build democracy in Ethiopia, imported language that Israel uses against the Palestinian Authority. While the interest of the regime in ensuring five more years in power has come with all sorts of flavours and intrigues, its efforts to stop genuine competition has been unmistakable, *inter alia*, by portraying the opposition as guilty in every way possible, as unelectable and unqualified to govern Ethiopia. We heard in the debates to the point of nausea ጥላሸት መቀባት (smear campaign) and their portrayal as fronts for terrorist and foreign agents.

This has not succeeded in disguising the fact that Ethiopia is not where it should have been. As in the past, there are immense sufferings, fear and insecurity; the much-vaunted economic growth and development cannot be substitute for the loss of dignity or recompense for the pains of mistreatment. Ethiopia could have done much better; it should have run faster and further away from its past. It has not happened; TPLF has squandered so many good prospects and opportunities.

In spite of two decades of focus on agriculture, the country is hardly capable of feeding itself. Nearly a quarter of its population is dependent on food aid. In a country where ADLI is supposed to accelerate agricultural development and industry, 15 years later there scarcely is meaningful linkage between the two, or has paved ways and means to overcome problems of investment (domestic and foreign) to allow industries to grow and expand. For instance, in the past 11 years industry has been in a state of stagnation, according to MOFED's latest macroeconomic report. This is no denial that Ethiopia is relatively better off today than in 1991, 2000 or 2005; its capital assets have increased and GDP growth has been good during the past six years.

Nonetheless, this has not stopped a significant number of the population from slipping into the wide cracks of poverty. Schools have expanded, but the quality of education is miserably poor at both grades level and in institutions of higher learning, one of the causes being the unresolved political problem and the consequent tension between teachers and government. Yes, there is now improved pace in the health sector, however, what are reported as success do not sufficiently differentiate between plan and achievement, thus, reflecting significant variances with international data, especially in maternal mortality, tuberculosis and other transmissible diseases. During its review of health care under MDG, UN recently placed Chad and Ethiopia as worst performers in health, on account of the huge gaps that exist in society. Moreover, the need for thought control has placed Ethiopia at tails end of ICT development in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Hear me out; I am not stating this to belittle the important achievements to date in infrastructure building and education expansion. The point I am driving home is Ethiopia could have done better in these twenty years, a season of favourable international resource transfers to the country, a situation without parallel in Ethiopian history. This failure is consequence of TPLF spending 12 out of 19 years in power in its internal struggles; its skidding at every turn over different policy and strategy experiments in search of what suits better its political objectives of single party control and permanence in power.

In terms of attitude, TPLF considers whatever is achieved under its rule as unique and debt to society. It demands public praise and loyalty as a matter of right and reward, oblivious that such is government duty and responsibility, not a favour to citizens. It demands votes by threatening communities to withhold their sustenance. Examine its policies, they are fool of holes; they are driven by its hunger for legitimacy, although it deeply resents and frustrates free and fair competition. Its top down approach hinders public participation in decision-making, including on matters affecting the lives of communities, future of their children; evidence of that is the handing over of fertile lands to foreign companies on 90-year leases, without consulting the rural population, which it considers its base.

This election is time to end such arrogant practices. There is need to strike the right balance between state powers on one hand, and the laws and needs of society, its growth and development and human needs for freedom and dignity on the other. The past two decades have shown that the country has not moved qualitatively in terms of its defence of citizens' human rights, civil liberties and the dignity of the individual as a citizen with inherent rights. For me, the issue is not supporting this party or that, as some allege. In the debates, the TPLF could have done better, if only it read correctly public sentiments and presented genuine proposals for reform of its governance policies and practices with strong commitment to the rule of law, genuine pluralism of ideas and organisations, tolerance, and mutual respect and ensure the country's longstanding interests. It did not happen; it has not happened; it cannot happen.

Therefore, my rationale for not supporting TPLF (EPRDF) is premised on holistic criteria, which have convinced me of its unsuitability to be good midwife for the future democratic Ethiopia. Ethiopia's future lies with accountable and transparent system of governance that would enable its individual citizens and its diverse ethnic groups to live in peace, freedom and equality, with the rule of law as society's anchor, what we surely know to be, TPLF's incurable Achilles heel. I make the case, as follows:

TPLF (EPRDF) displays features of multi-party democracy, but in practice it runs dictatorship of single party

- **Freedom of organisation:** By law, in Ethiopia political parties can be formed. Nevertheless, no sooner than it came into force in 1995 that constitutional provision has been replaced by TPLF's whims and secret practices. The first reason for that is TPLF sees power as its reward for overthrowing the military regime. Experience has shown that it is vehemently opposed to the existence of other political parties or mass organisations outside its umbrella. When these democratic requirements are forced upon it by internal or external pressures, as is the case today, it operates either stealthily to undermine every one or like a well-forecasted tornado demolishes everything along its path.
- Secondly, this is inherent characteristic of TPLF, reinforced at its core by its unyielding loyalty to its Marxist roots as liberation movement, whose guiding principle demands that decisions taken by a few comrades (politburo) or a powerful boss at the top is passed down the ladder to become the ruling idea of society. In the past nearly twenty years, TPLF leaders have been exercising ill-gained veto power over the voice, interests and resources of the Ethiopian people, the apparent motive of which is their permanent control of society. In government this has been reinforced by chapter VIII of the constitution, empowering the prime minister as "...the Chief Executive, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and the Commander-in-Chief of the national armed forces", with unlimited powers and terms of office.
- Nine months before the 2005 election, the United Nations convened a panel of experts to determine the state and future of democracy in Ethiopia. The findings of the panel proved accurate then, as evidenced by events of the 2005 election and its aftermath, as now by negative development in the run up to the May 23rd national election. Based on information by the expert panel, the report concluded,
"Ethiopia consists of a multiparty democracy whereby the ruling party allows other parties to register, but it does not allow them to compete freely for political power." It also added, "The regional and local governments of Ethiopia are constituted under a one-party system where voters are assisted by the Government-managed electoral authority to support the election of the ruling party."
Governance Profile of Ethiopia, United Nations, 2004
- Recall from the first debate between political parties at the end of February that all opposition members disagreed with the governing party that there is genuine devolution of power in Ethiopia. In summing that consensus, the representative of EDP said:
"Opposition parties have 165 (?) seats in parliament, each of them having won their woredas (districts) throughout the country. However, not a single opposition party has a woreda or a region to administer; or even kebele to run, let alone seat in cabinet—the unmistakable evidence that Ethiopia is a one party state" [writer's translation].
- From time to time, TPLF uses well-calibrated shock therapy to reinforce existing fear within society. One such latest 'treatment' is the bombshell the prime minister dropped in his oral response to questions by parliamentarians on 18 March, where he said opposition parties that smear the name of his party would be liable to court cases. This is the clearest and most dangerous warning yet to date, aimed at pre-empting any expectations among candidates and citizens that the election would be free and fair and that they could exercise their right of free speech to make their case against the ruling party.
- Another telling example of how TPLF strengthens its hold on power can be demonstrated by using as an example the ongoing dispute between the regime and members of the original Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA). Clearly, since 2008 what we know is that their association has been officially replaced by the government-sponsored Ethiopian Teachers Association. As a union matter, the case continues to be topic of discussion at the International Labour Organisation (ILO). It is known as **case No 2516**, involving anti-union activities by the government that is under consideration. Right at this moment, the ILO is waiting for information from government on its implementation of its numerous recommendations.
- Recall that, in resisting TPLF's attempts to hijack their association from 1992 – 2008, ETA's leaders were forced to spend their time between prison and court until 2008, when finally the court decided against them. Therefore, after that decision, the government-sponsored ETA has been allowed to stand in their stead, appropriating their name, bank accounts and properties, although it has barely succeeded in supplanting them. That is why there is continuing tension between government and teachers in Ethiopia.
- This case was brought against the government to the ILO by the original ETA and Education International (EI), supported by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL). Their case was resubmitted with additional information in 2009, to which the regime responded denying charges of violating teachers' rights, violating their human rights, as follows,

"The lawful incarceration of some teachers has nothing to do with the exercise of their rights as members of the ETA or their trade union activities. In this respect, the Government refers to the Committee's findings in other cases and, in particular, its observation that 'participation in trade union activities cannot serve as immunity against prosecution for breaches of ordinary criminal laws'. Following street riots and criminal offences perpetrated by extreme wings of opposition parties after the May 2005 elections, several individuals were charged and were brought before courts of law for their direct participation in activities which resulted in loss of lives and wanton destruction of public property. Other individuals were also arrested and detained in 2006 and 2007 for their involvement in a clandestine operation sponsored and run by illegal armed groups based in Eritrea with the declared objective of the forcible overthrow of the constitutional order in Ethiopia." (ILO Governing Body GB 304/6, para. 987, March 2009)

- Clearly, the above does not answer to what happened from 1999-2005. In the views of the ILO's two committees looking into the matter, **case No 2516** is not over, especially as those resisting government efforts to dismantle their organisation have re-established themselves as the National Teachers Association (NTA). The regime has refused them right of registration, and joining the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU). In June 2009, NTA representatives attended meetings of ILO's Committee on the Application of Standards, where they were allowed to lodge their complaints, despite government objection to their presence (ILO Provisional Record, 8th Session, 2009 16 PART TWO (Rev.)).

- In response, the Committee observed,

"With regard to the numerous cases of arrests and detention of the original complainant, ETA, members, the Committee notes that the Government reiterates its previous statement to the effect that these arrests and detentions do not relate to their trade union membership, but, rather, some were arrested and detained for their involvement in criminal offences perpetrated by extreme wings of opposition parties after the elections in May 2005, which resulted in loss of life, and others were arrested and detained in 2006 and 2007 for their involvement in clandestine operations sponsored and run by illegal armed groups based in Eritrea. The Committee regrets that the Government's replies amount to general denial that the arrests and detentions were related to trade union activities and are simply to the effect that the arrests were made for subversive activities, based on ordinary criminal law. The Committee has always followed the rule that, in such cases, the governments concerned should submit further and as precise information as possible in order to enable the Committee to conclude that they are not related to the exercise of trade union activities. The Committee expresses deep concern over the failure of the Government to conduct a full and independent inquiry into the allegations made relating to arrests and detention of trade unionists, particularly in light of the long time that has elapsed since their arrest without any court yet pronouncing itself on the matters and given that those teachers previously arrested on similar charges were finally released without charge by the Federal High Court ruling that they had no case to answer." (ILO Governing Body GB 304/6, para. 1001, March 2009)

- Last June, when the Committee on the Application of Standards was expecting official report on implementation of its recommendation, government representative decried ILO's insistence to discuss violations of teachers' rights. He portrayed the dispute as mere squabble between groups, trivialising the issue with which the Committee was seized with seriousness, as follows:

"[it is] A dispute between two groups of individuals, each claiming to be the legitimate representative of the Ethiopian Teachers Association (ETA), which had been in existence since 1949. This dispute was the subject of a long-standing legal battle involving many judicial institutions, from the First Instance Court to the Cassation Division of the Federal Supreme Court. A group of former teachers, supported and financed by external actors, had challenged the legal status of the then new leadership of the ETA. This new leadership had been established following a change of government in Ethiopia and the subsequent introduction of a federal arrangement, under which teachers from all corners of the country were represented. The group, led by some senior supporters of the former military regime, was opposed to the ETA's reorganization due to a purely political aversion to the country's new political system. Whereas a diverse political opinion within an organization was acceptable, and even supported, this group rejected the legally constituted body and chose not to surrender the ETA premises and property under its possession. A legal process was thus triggered over the legality of representation, and the handing over of premises and property." (PR No. 16B (Rev.) June 18, 2009)

- The Committee was not pleased, with that government response, which did not include any actions to resolve the problem. Consequently, at its meeting held on 19 June 2009, the Committee concluded,

"Recalling that the matters raised in this case concerned repeated and grave violations of the Convention, the Committee urged the Government to take all necessary measures to ensure the registration of the National Teachers' Association without delay so that teachers were able to fully exercise their right to form organizations for furthering and defending their occupational interests. The Committee further expressed its deep concern at the important and continuing allegations of grave violations of basic civil liberties for which detailed information had yet to be forthcoming from the Government. The Committee strongly urged the Government to guarantee that these workers could exercise their trade union rights in full security and expected that it would carry out full and independent investigations without delay and provide a detailed report to the supervisory bodies on the outcome." (PR No. 16B (Rev.) June 18, 2009)

- From the foregoing it is possible to conclude that what TPLF has been doing all these years is not any different from the Dergue's. It is committed to single objective of using mass organisations as tools toward its goal of permanent domination of society. In so doing, the Dergue left the people without means to build civil society organisations. This suited the TPLF, which found people without any mechanism to defend their interests against its tyrannical onslaughts of their freedoms and democratic rights.
- Consequently, in furtherance of that, TPLF strategists as of January 2, 2010 have come with a new mechanism to ensure their continuity, which would adversely affect integrity of the election. They have successfully orchestrated formation of 'coalition of civil society organisations', preparing to deploy 40,000 election observers throughout the country. One such civil society organisation is ETA; it is also secretary of the coalition. Therefore, a body whose integrity is under questioning, at least, internationally for its usurpation of the rights and properties of the original ETA, with the help of its sponsor, the government, which is also accused of violating the right of assembly, organisation and human rights of teachers under ILO **case No.2516**.

- Why should we be suspicious of the role of some of these ‘civil society organisations’? We already know the coalition’s attitude, for instance, regarding the presence during the election of foreign observers. Read carefully and reflect on what Ato Kassahun Follo, vice president of the new coalition and president of CETU, who told the *Reporter*: “ከወጭታዊ ሰዎች በተሻለ ያገባናል የምንል እኛ ነን፤ ከእኛ በላይ ምክክርነት ሊሰጡልዎቻለሁ ተመሳሳይ ዓላማዬን ረገጥን እንጂ በመቃዝብ ላይ ከእነርሱ ጋር አካል ሳይሆን ከእነርሱ በላይ እንሠራለን፡፡ ብቃቱም ችሎታውም ታላላቅ ተምህላን፡፡” (“*We say this task concerns us more than it does foreign observers. They cannot be better observers than we are. Whereas we share with them common objectives on this mission, not only would we do the task of observing the election like them, but better than they do. We have the skills, the capacity and the responsibility*” (writer’s translation).
- The texture of this bristling language sounds familiar; as can be expected, it is taken from one of TPLF’s instructional manuals on election observation to local observers. For my solace, compare the above with the statement of EPRDF’s spokesperson Sekou Ture Getachew of March 21 to the *Reporter* and tell me I was overreacting. He said, “ታዛቢዎች ከወሰኑም ከወጭ ሰዎች ራሳቸው ሆኖ፤ በዋነኝነት ግን የአገር ወስጥ ታዛቢ የራሱን ሥራ ስለሚመጣም፤ የእርሱ ትዝብነት ወሳኝና ጠቃሚ ነው።” (“*While the presence of local and foreign observers may be good, on the main, however, the presence of local observers is decisive and beneficial, as they would be in a position to review their work constantly*” (*Reporter*, writer’s translation).
- It is imperative that local observers are and under normal circumstances, they are known to do marvellous jobs, as it is something that would affect society as a whole and them individually. Nonetheless, how free would government-sponsored civil societies be? Would they give precedence to societal interests and their conscience over the demands of their party for their loyalty, which is stern on such matters? As the emergence of the government-sponsored ETA has shown, some or most of them may become camouflage for the mass presence of those with party missions as election observers, with instructions to enable the party prevail over its opponents. For the ruling party, by definition the opposition side is a front for subversive anti-Ethiopian organisations, Derguists, anti-democracy elements, Eritrean agents and representatives of foreign interests, bent on undermining Ethiopian independence and its assertiveness! That is what the TPLF is banking on at the moment.

BY WAY OF RESPONSE TO DILWENBERU NEGA et al

In his article “*Genet Merasha’s bigotry is a photo negative of the late Kinijit’s Tigreanophobia*”, 24th March, aigaforum.com, the above-mentioned gentleman engaged in unnecessary vitriol, thus, misrepresenting the content and import of my article, “*THE PEOPLE vs. TPLF (EPRDF): TIGRAI, ADDIS ABABA...SCALE UP DEFIANCE*” of 23 March (nazret.com, tecolahagos.com, ethioguardian.com, ethioquest.com, abugida.com, ethiopianmediaforum). The allegations are baseless, I must say, intended to serve the pleasure of his gallery to which his very well attuned. What is troubling is, as if possessed by some spirit, he spat fire all over, alleging that “Genet swings from making a racist slur against Tigreans to making unsubstantiated accusations on the continuing electoral process.” Even almost invoking a Nazi era parallel, he went on to say, “Her perfervid anti-Tigreanism pushes her so hard that she just stopped short from equating Tigreans with the German Herrenvolk (‘master race’ or ‘aristocratic race’).”

Let me first of all say, how horrified I am by his ludicrous charge of racism, and “perfervid anti-Tigreanism”. Notwithstanding his ignorance of the meaning of ‘racism’, I would relate to him what someone told me some time ago about similarities between TPLF and a whip. He said, they share common characteristic: both of them habitually lash and feign being hurt. In case, Dilwenberu could not understand the message of my article, despite his ostentatious word-smithery and proclivity to linguistic pomposity, the article right from its title is applauding the determination of the residents of Tigrai (towns listed in its body) and Addis Ababa for exercising their right to choose hoping to quench their thirst for genuine democracy and freedom. In terms of substance, it states,

“Imagine for a moment, the people weathering off incessant threats on their jobs and livelihoods, concerted and violent actions to stop them. They [the residents of Mekelle, Tembein, Adowa, Axum, Addis Ababa...] came to the meetings and opened up a window of opportunity to heal and renew the deep and longstanding familial ties between Tigreans and other Ethiopians, which TPLF’s self-serving ethnic politics has strained for some time now for its ends. I do hope in earnest that March 14 has set in motion the process of its renewal on a more firm course” (THE PEOPLE vs. TPLF (EPRDF): TIGRAI, ADDIS ABABA...SCALE UP DEFIANCE).

What gives the gentleman stomach ache there? If racism could apply to Tigreans, why has he not accused me of the same against Addis Ababans that are referenced in the same article, the same line and in the same breath? Yes, if he is bothered by the article making strong distinction between Tigreans and TPLF, tough luck, it is a different story. Then he is right to react as such, preferably without his ‘racism’ disgrace, since exercise by the people of their freedom to choose and determine how and by whom they should be governed affects his livelihood and future as TPLF’s paid stringer. In that case, sorry to disappoint him, I cannot be of any help there. Now that he has falsely and wrongly accused me of racism, what should he be? He is an authentic clone of a crooked lawyer, who would get his criminal client off the hook by all means under the sun, but legally and truthfully and on innocence criterion.

As to my alleged “unsubstantiated accusations on the continuing electoral process,” I refer him to re-read what I wrote above. Not only Ethiopian citizens have become wary and critical of TPLF, but also the regime’s foremost backers. They are now upfront in their unsparing castigation of the worsening harassment of the opposition, which is intensified as the rush to the finish line has gained momentum. I say to my friend, “*Forget about democracy*”, borrowing the title of *The Economist* of 25 March. It should show him what the world thinks of the regime’s claim of commitment to free and fair election and democracy-building.

That must also be racism, Dilwenberu, isn’t it? The people in power must be panicking about the challengers they are facing in this election. They accuse everyone left and right of conspiracy against mother Ethiopia at one time and alleging campaign against TPLF’s pursuit of independent policies at another. Sorry love! At least, for one, that is not the testimony of African attendees at the Copenhagen Conference of last December! Shouldn’t they too be racists, using your logic my dear Dilwenberu Nega?