

Quo Vadis Ethiopia? (Ethiopia Wodet?)

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye

(Note: This article was to be presented at the "Horn of Africa Conference" held at Pentagon City in Virginia. I'll state my observation about it at the end).

PART I

I. Background:

Why should, at this point and time, any Ethiopian care about where Ethiopia is heading? What exactly is at stake for Ethiopians as a people and Ethiopia as a country and why? What are Ethiopians' fears and hopes as individuals and as a people? Does the future of a country entirely depend more on a certain generation or generations than others and at a certain time under certain circumstances? Which generation's responsibility is it to care about the future of a country? How is the future of a given society shaped? As Ethiopians, what led us to be where we are? What is my generation's responsibility to leaving Ethiopia a better place for coming generation or generations? What is to become of Ethiopia, not tomorrow or next year but in twenty to thirty years from now? What do we envisage and how do we think what we do now, both as individuals and as groups, would influence or shape the country's future?

I believe that it is only healthy and appropriate for each generation to ask itself these and other similar questions and see itself in the eye and give honest answers. No generation could be greater or more gratified than the one that leaves to its children (the next generation) a more peaceful, more stable, more unified, more democratic, more progressive, more developed and more prosperous, in short a better place in all major aspects of their lives, where citizens are proud of themselves and the place they call home – their country. Conversely, there is no greater failing and travesty for a generation to do than to allow the next generation to be worse off than its predecessors in as far as their standard of living and overall security and wellbeing are concerned.

Ethiopia, at this critical point in time, finds itself once again at a historical crossroads where Ethiopians are faced with a stark choice to make between charting a future with peace, tranquility, unity, prosperity and social progress – making Ethiopia the great country it could and should be, or a direction toward the country's descent to a failed state status and a political turmoil leading to social calamity and eventual dissolution and disintegration of their country. Because we Ethiopians, as a society, failed to properly and

adequately address our fundamental socio-political problems such as grinding poverty, illiteracy, justice, equality, civic, civil and human rights, etc., we have allowed ourselves to come to a point where our survival as a people and our country's unity are being doubted. Warranted or not, people talk of the possibility or even the probability of Ethiopia's disintegration. Some even cavalierly talk about the inevitability of it as a foregone conclusion. But, without being carried away with irrational fearful thoughts borne out of exaggerated but genuine and legitimate nationalistic concerns about the unity of the country, or by an unrealizable ambition-driven exuberance for cessation and fear tactics employed by mainly the ethnocentric political elite whose express desire is to convolutedly exploit the legitimate grievances of the people who only seek human dignity, equality, justice and fairness, what legal or legitimate reasons do we have to argue for or against this critical question of unity versus danger of dissolution? Is the concern over the country's unity unfounded, a hysterical obsession and a misguided angst or a justifiably legitimate concern of real possibility? And above all why and who should worry about it? What exactly do we mean when we talk of the dissolution of Ethiopia, and how and why do we envisage the realization of such a nightmarish scenario? If so, which course and what form will it take - the way EPRDF's "constitution" allows as stipulated under Article 39 and following the regime's ethnic federal lines or through violence or through connivance or something in between or a combination of all? Is it really possible, realistic or feasible? Does it have to happen, or is it inevitable or according to some even desirable? How and why would it be so? If it comes to that, who benefits from a disunited Ethiopia and why? So, which way is Ethiopia, or more precisely, which way do we Ethiopians want Ethiopia to go - Quo Vadis Ethiopia?

It is my hope that we can and should examine the fears and dangers and the counter arguments in a fact-based realistic, rational and constructive manner. Confident that we have nothing to fear about any questions being raised, no matter how dreadful and unpleasant the possible or even probable realities may sound or are, I intend, in this presentation, to answer these questions as much as I can. The focus is on fundamental issues and issues alone and not on specific persons or groups. After all it is about the fate of our country and people - of course with ramifications going beyond our borders - that we are concerned about and not about individual actors per se. Open discussions and dialogues are very important and our situation demands that.

Although I am keenly aware of the precarious conditions and the untenable situation we as Ethiopians find ourselves in, and the predicament of being at crossroads at this historical juncture, it is my sincere belief and strong conviction that dissolution of our country is neither an unavoidable nor irreversible nor desirable. I am not emphatically saying that it is not

possible. It is quite probable and feasible. But why, to what end and to whose benefit would that be is the critical question. More importantly, why should the question of unity be more of a concern to certain Ethiopians than to others, and conversely, why should certain groups hold cessation as an instrument of intimidation and a means of getting unreasonable and irrational importance to the level of holding unity and progressive forces hostage? Why should such group of ethno-elites be allowed to play the role of a harbinger of all that has to change or dictate how our future should be? And why is that allowed while the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians, knowing too well that their unity has nothing to do with their continued misery, have no qualms with their unity, or indeed relish, cherish and endear it? Ethiopia is the sum total of all its citizens and equally belongs to all of its citizens. Sadly, because of successive despotic rulers and tyrannical regimes, definitely the fundamental question of equality of citizens in every aspect was not guaranteed and exercised.

As we shall see in parts II and III of my presentation, this phenomenon run deep in our history with various groups exchanging hands and experiencing inequality. Victimized by backward oppressive systems, Ethiopians of all language groups suffered the brutality of successive regimes. Our people's continued struggle, at different times and in different forms, to free themselves from the shackles of oppression, inequality and subjugation has at times been misconstrued by some quarters that are bent on taking the people's genuine disaffection against misrule and their overall grievances to a different and distorted direction to being a struggle against their unity. One thing that has to be made clear here is that there is no country that was formed or that continues to survive only through every individual's full accord. Ethiopia, as was the case with many countries, was formed through a long and arduous process of assimilation and integration of its people of different backgrounds that took hundreds and thousands of years, a process that keeps going despite relentless efforts by some to undo it. That process, understandably, was not strife-less nor was it all the way peaceful. I know that some compatriots, especially the political ethno-elites, may consider any argument for unity as a chauvinistic proposition aimed at keeping the old archaic order of the bygone era. However, what has to be very clear to such suggestions is that no unity can be contemplated if the equality, dignity and honor of citizens are not guaranteed and fully respected.

Some may naively think that the way to redress past or even present injustices perpetrated by tyrannical systems is to either embark on a vengeful act of oppression by unfairly holding certain language groups, particularly the Amara, accountable for the mistakes and crimes of oppressive regimes, and unconscionably victimizing them, or engaging in an ill-advised and futile effort of cessation from the rest of the country.

As long as human beings opt to congregate and live together as a community, and as long as countries are a collection of individuals living in communities, the free individual has an obligation to the needs of the community as do communities to the individual. Freedom goes hand in hand with obligations. Therefore, as wonderful, essential and very fundamental as freedom of the individual is, the common interest, in this case the people's interest, to a life of a united people, has to be taken into account.

Different groups populate a given country and become citizens with full rights and distinct obligations. All population groups constituting the citizenry of a country at a given time in history may not all have the same backgrounds, origins or religions. They may also have populated the country at different times. As such, some groups may claim indigeneity and, depending on social relations among various groups, some may regard others as latecomers or intruders. Had only one religion, background or ethnic origin were that constituted a country, this world would have had thousands of countries, and civilization and progress as we know them now would have been stunted or even nonexistent. What needs to be clear, however, is that this earth in a larger sense and Ethiopia in our particular case predate any human species let alone any specific language group of people that presently live in it. Before there were people there was the land, unless, of course, anyone is insane enough to claim to have created the land. And before specific languages, there were people. As important a cultural heritage and an identity as any language is, the fact that there lived ancestors of today's Ethiopians before there was Geez or Tigrinya, Afargna or Amarigna, Guragna, or Oromigna, etc. was ever spoken should not be overlooked. In hundreds of years in the future, Ethiopians may opt to speak only one of the multitude of languages currently spoken by its people or may develop a totally new language as was the case with Amargna. That, however, will not alter the fact that Ethiopians at one time spoke different languages or that history should be allowed to be a hindrance to their unity. In our case, notwithstanding how each language group of Ethiopians ended up in present day Ethiopia, they all have an equal stake and equal responsibility to its continuity as an entity, for their collective wellbeing and security are directly tied to it. I will argue as to why this is in the last part of this personal opinion of mine.

It has to be abundantly clear that the unity of Ethiopia should be a very serious concern of every Ethiopian. But this should not be taken as a simplistic suggestion aimed at saving the unity of the country for unity's sake per se. No, it is more than unity for unity's sake. It is simply a question of living in peace and stability or constant internecine conflict; being able to live in a pluralist society, having social progress and upward mobility of society or being under the rule of exploitative and tyrannical regimes whose continuity

would be at the mercy and service of foreign or regional powers. Therefore, because of combinations of existing factors and socio-economic trajectories, for the people who live in it and call it home and wish to live in peace and tranquility, the unity of the country now, more than any time before, is of paramount importance to all Ethiopians.

Aware of the grievous consequences of the specter of losing the Civil War that threatened the Union, President Abraham Lincoln who was responsible for the Jan. 1, 1863 Emancipation Proclamation that freed African slaves said, just before it was issued, that "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave, I would do it, if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that". He knew too well that disunity could have condemned many, if not all, to perpetual slavery.

It is my personal belief that every problem, no matter how difficult and insurmountable it looks or happens to be, comes with a positive solution within or beneath it that, if approached with prudence, care and diligence, and due serious attention is given to it and if tackled methodically and with absolute resoluteness, could usher in positively life changing results. I look at our current mountain of problems that way.

A country's problems should not be passively ignored or left unaddressed in a clear, open and timely manner, and no matter the cost or sacrifice that it may require, should be courageously tackled by current generations and should not be shoved down the throat of the next ones. This can be done only if and when societal problems are addressed at all levels as a society. And this requires institutions and incorruptible, selfless, visionary, courageous and inspirational leadership that puts the interests of the whole above and beyond self or group.

Ethiopia, throughout our checkered history of constant wars and conflicts, hardships and tranquility, ups and downs, had been blessed with such visionary leaders who jealously put the interests of their people and country above theirs. Despite being despotic and undemocratic, consistent with and expected of absolute monarchical systems, Ethiopian rulers, no matter where they originated from, prided themselves as sovereigns to all, saw their subjects the same and were accepted and treated as such.

In fact, Ethiopia was endowed with far sighted leaders who earned the love, respect and trust of their people. Leaders who gave their priority, geared their full attention and dedicated their entire energies and lives to the glory, unity and progress of their country. We had people like Atse Tewedros, the embodiment of selfless dedication and courage, who did not even have a

permanent palace to call his own and did not possess much of any personal wealth. Cognizant of the fact that Ethiopia was always a target of incessant foreign aggressions and convinced that a truly independent, respected, united and peaceful Ethiopia could only be viable, this Ethiopian lion envisioned to making Ethiopia an advanced, self-supporting and strong country able to defend itself with indigenously developed military technology. Leaders like Kaleb, who in 525 AD(*1)- was keenly aware of the dangers of ignoring the consequences of regional instability and that oppression and subjugation of humans anywhere was not to be tolerated - mustered a hundred thousand of his military in response to the request and plea of suffering and oppressed Arabs across the Red Sea; the ingenuity and dedication of successive Zagwe kings like Atse Lalibela, the embodiment of self reliance and creativity, who had the vision of making the country the Holy place it could be by replicating the Holy Land in Ethiopia and enriched the country's literature and legacy; Queen Eleni who, sensing the danger of extremism creeping into Ethiopia, foresaw the need for having stronger international relations and alliances that ultimately proved to be critically important in combating religious extremism; Atse Libne-Dingil, the personification of unflinching sense of Ethiopian resistance, resiliency and perseverance, who in the face of unprecedented merciless and relentless jihadist campaigns withstood untold suffering and sacrifice, without abdicating his throne or submitting his authority or abandoning his people, kept the people's hope alive till the end of his life; Lij Iyassou, the ultimate integrationist and assimilation advocate who epitomized religious and cultural tolerance, saw the need for respecting and cherishing the country's diversity through deeds and personal experiences, and the wisdom he exhibited, despite pressures from the British, the Turks and the French to do otherwise, in keeping Ethiopia neutral and not take sides with any single party of the warring sides of World war I; Menelik II, the consummate diplomat, who, through his unmatched wisdom, promoted religious tolerance through dialogue and state sponsored open debates, his ability and sophistication on to keep constantly conspiring European colonists at bay and his vision and tireless effort to make Ethiopia a modern state, at times through personal example, earned him unparalleled love and unconditional respect of his countrymen; the unwavering courage and the embodiment of staunch Ethiopian patriotism of Yohanes IV, the ability of Haile Selassie to forge unity of his divided society following the ouster of Italian aggressors, his wisdom to untangle the never ceasing conspiracies of the British in order to keep Ethiopia's territorial integrity and independence, his consistency, insistence and capacity to regain access to the Red Sea, and many others too many to count, all did their level best to make Ethiopia a better and stronger place.

*(*1), The two major regional and world powers of the time – Ethiopia and Greece – responded militarily to the appeal of Arabs across from the Red Sea, where Ethiopia sent over a hundred thousand of her troops in two batches (and 170 ships). Greece also sent in her troops.*

Given the prevailing dangerously fast deteriorating overall security, political, social and economic conditions our country and people find themselves in, and given the general ever complex nature of them in regards to the national, regional and international interconnectivity, the sheer magnitude and enormity of our problems that the current generation and that of mine are faced with, can neither be underestimated nor ignored. It, therefore, will only be appropriate and necessary for any rational Ethiopian to soberly and dispassionately assess where we are, what led us to be where we are and to come to a resolute determination not to pass on to the next generation of Ethiopians a country in a worse shape than what it currently is. The least a generation could and should strive for and be resolute about is never to leave to the next generation a country worse off than it found it or it currently is.

Can my generation, or the one that came after it, be counted on to carry the mantle of responsibility as did many generations in the past under similarly, if not more, difficult circumstances?

Throughout our glorious yet tortured mosaic history, generation after generation of Ethiopians have stood up and carried the day. It may come as a surprise to some that this is not the first time in our long recorded history that Ethiopia has faced difficult problems that threatened its very survival. As such, Ethiopia's obituary had been written and predictions of the end of it as a country were made many a time in the past. But to the dismay and unpleasant surprise of her ill-wishers and to the delight and relief of its populace, it has survived and thrived as a country.

The complexity and magnitude of our problems at the present time and the attention and urgency required to appropriately address them notwithstanding, what gives me hope for a better future more than anything else, is, among other things, our track record as a people. In times past, whenever the country was at crossroads, Ethiopians, in their amazing time tested God-fearing spiritually tuned tradition and tolerant culture, saw things soberly and from a farsighted perspective. That kind of societal approach helped Ethiopians, as a people, to overcome the problems of the day and enabled them to exercise forgiveness among them that proved to be instrumental in avoiding wholesale, self destructive cyclical internecine conflict of retribution. That is how the Ethiopian people defied all predictions of doom and gloom and assured our continued survival as a country. In fact, after repeated disastrous turns of events, Ethiopians came out more resilient and managed to leave to the next generation at least not a worse off country.

There are concrete historical evidences where Ethiopians as a people, through their sheer dogged determination and willingness to sacrifice - often to the dismay of those who so voraciously, viciously and incessantly tried to

create discord and division among them in order to see a divided and fragmented Ethiopia - repulsed and expelled foreign aggressions, sailed through troubled waters, stood up against all kinds of subversive activities, including regional and religion based conflicts and civil strife, solved their internal problems and saved their country's unity. They did that with valor, dignity and honor, and against all odds and surpassing expectations, by cherishing their diversity which is anchored in their unity, and transcending ethnicity, regionalism and religion. By overcoming adversity and minimizing, and at times altogether avoiding devastating total internecine civil war, they have time and again proven to be masters of their own destiny. If that has been our history, why would and should it be any different now?

My deep and unwavering faith in the greatness, capacity and ingenuity of the Ethiopian people to address and solve their multifaceted and myriad of internal problems is what is going to be the main engine of change that will propel the country to a new height of civilization and economic progress within the next couple of decades. I will cite later just a few examples to illustrate this wonderful history of revivalism, tenacity, valor and greatness and what it will take to having an enabling environment a bit later.

Taking this historical track record as a background, it can safely be said that the country can certainly overcome current problems and become the beacon of hope, not only for its ever growing population, but also for our volatile and turbulent region as a good example of stability and progress.

II. As a society and a country, where are we heading and what are the dangers?

Given the ever growing domestic, regional and international radicalizing influences, the depth and breadth of our fundamental societal problems emanating from unbending and unending vicious cycle of tyranny and misrule that continue unabated and unsolved for millennia; the simmering desperation and hopelessness of citizens, the amount of frustration and dissatisfaction of the people of Ethiopia towards the current government of EPRDF; the exploding size of population with unparalleled demographic structure, the rampant inequity and the high level of poverty, injustice and other social ills that could further aggravate and elevate the frustration level that is pushing the people to the edges with the potential of easily enticing them to all kinds of extremist positions; the number of organized groups arrayed against the regime and forms of struggle they have already employed and the ones that of necessity may surface as yet; the nature and manner of foreign hands that have enmeshed themselves not only in the regional but also the internal affairs of our country, the lamentably shameful state of

affairs of the viscerally fragmented opposition with some of the most shortsighted and self-absorbed of leaders; the advent of raw and at times savagely heated and fierce competition-ridden gobbling globalization that seems to have no qualms with trampling upon not only human rights but also basic human dignity for market and natural resources, and above all the recklessly irresponsible and callous nature of the government of the day whose policies are anchored on a perversely divisive politicized ethnocentricity, all in combination existing now can be a recipe for fast track journey towards a failed state.

Because of these combinations of factors, there are credible fears that a dangerous descent of our beloved country to a failing state status is real. The saddest part is that, if and when it is allowed to come to that, it would not be a country simply divided and condemned to extinction, but a place where not a single section of its fragmented parts would ever be at peace not only with its "neighbors" but also and mainly within itself. Whence such a tragedy strikes us, how this could ever have been allowed to happen in the first place would be a thing that would haunt every living Ethiopian for generations to come.

While hopeful of our future, I am, nonetheless, not agnostic about the real mortal dangers the country is facing. As I will discuss this further in the last part of this personal opinion piece, the realness and almost certainty of the dangers as such notwithstanding, I am positively convinced that this is not only reversible but can also be an opportunity for Ethiopians to be on a solid footing to be a stable, democratic, great and prosperous nation. I am ready to argue and show, despite all the negatives arrayed against Ethiopia, how and why the country, under certain conditions, not only would prevail but could and should become a solidly united, peaceful, prosperous and developed place its citizens fondly and proudly call home, be an envy of her neighbors and a good role model to the rest of the world with similar population diversity and chronic problems.

As I mentioned earlier, my firm optimism is basically and mainly founded on our colorful history and track record as a people, realities of the unattractiveness and the dissuasiveness of the alternative and recent experiences, both internal and regional, and demographic shift unprecedented in the country's history.

III. What is at stake?

Ethiopians both individually and collectively should be reasonably and seriously concerned about the unity and territorial integrity of their country,

the safety, security and wellbeing of its people, and ways and means of ending the cycle of tyrannical rule and how to empower the people by ushering in a democratic order to guarantee their human and political rights and civil liberties.

For many Ethiopians the greatest danger for our unity comes from current ethnic politics that has been instituted by the government in power. This policy evidently has divided our people. But the depth and seriousness of it remains susceptible indefinite and indeterminate. Although current inter-ethnic relations among Ethiopians may appear to be less desirable and to some extent worsening to warrant serious worry and unease, it is my personal opinion that it is only skin deep and reversible, but if and only if decisive measures are taken to properly address its corrosive nature.

But, what exactly are at stake for all Ethiopians and why?

Well, under the prevailing calamitous circumstances these are at stake: The first one is their unity as a people and a country; the second is their safety, security and wellbeing; the third is their rights and freedoms, and the fourth is a democratic order and prosperity.

Under normal circumstances, the order would be almost the reverse, as there cannot be a democratic order without freedom of the people and it would be pointless to wish for prosperity or security or wellbeing without having justice, and there can be no justice if people are not free. But, what is at stake in short for Ethiopia and Ethiopians now is our very survival as a country and a people. And for any people or country fighting for their survival, the stakes are high and sacrifices are greater begging for altering priorities. One thing that has to be very clear, though, is that no freedom should be sacrificed for a false sense of security, as people who are not free are prone to be denied all their rights including their choice to be a united people and the opportunity to live in a united country.

But the question now is that what makes our survival supersede all the rest? Why would Ethiopians give priority to fighting for and saving their unity first? What are the compelling reasons that it would be to the benefit of all Ethiopians to saving our unity? Some may jump to a cliché, the usually heard hallow conclusion based on inconsiderate and ill-informed assumptions that whoever gives priority to the unity of the country is either a chauvinistic nuts, a megalomaniac who only cares for domination or one that tries to trample upon people's rights and freedoms in the guise of unity, etc. etc... Well, I'll not fault all who say that out of hand or be dismissive of their fears as that could be true in many instances, especially by dictatorial and tyrannical regimes who often silence political dissent by evoking unity and resorting to such tactics. But the prevailing circumstances and realities on

the ground call for a rearrangement of our priorities commensurate with the exigencies of the time.

I know I could easily be misunderstood. No problem. It is my responsibility to clear the clouds of doubt by trying to explain what and why I think unity for now is, and should be, the primary goal that Ethiopians need to worry about and really strive for - that is what is at stake.

Some may take the question of unity in its simplistic sense and without due regard to the all round repercussions as an impediment to group rights, whatever that would mean. Unity in our case at this critical historical juncture is the alpha and omega of our continued survival guaranteeing both individual and group rights and creating a more conducive environment for social progress much better than the alternative, an alternative not to be desired by any.

First of all, when I talk of unity I am talking of unity of its people, an **empowered and free people**, who are masters of their own destiny. Freedom is priceless and should reign supreme. But freedom is neither free nor cheap. Secondly, the reason I strongly advocate to put our priorities on our unity over the rest now is that under the prevailing circumstances and domestic, regional and international conditions, all Ethiopians benefit from their unity. Conversely all will be losing greatly if they let their unity slip away, for it would result in the loss of all the rest in a rather more tragic and regrettable manner. I dare say that the disadvantages in every aspect of the lives of Ethiopians and their future greatly outweigh the imagined benefits to them as individuals or groups if the country is allowed to disintegrate. I will show the reasons why that is in the last part of this paper.

IV. How do current events influence and determine what is at stake?

IV.1 Election 2010 and its possible ramifications:

At the moment some Ethiopians may be concerned about, and indeed many are preoccupied with, the scheduled May, 2010 general election in the country. A lot is said about it. (Among many, the organization I belong to, The Ethiopian Democratic Hibre Hizb Unity Movement, issued a 16-page analysis on it months ago. ([EDHUM-Mircha Hulet Shih Huletna Tegnawamiw Kifl.pdf](#))).

What makes elections under TPLF/EPRDF different from those conducted under Atse Haile-Selassie or the Dergue, is that the latter never pretended elections under them would result in changing the statuesque or to be democratic, whereas the carefully orchestrated, colorful and saliently

pretentious propaganda under the current regime, mainly aimed at hoodwinking the donor community without whose mainly unqualified all-round help and assistance it would find it difficult to survive. The regime's leaders have been cleverly crafty and extremely witty in their longstanding ability at selling themselves and at their pretense to present themselves in a typically chameleonic manner and hiding their true self, the way their western audience would want them to be. They have an extensive experience of presenting themselves for what they are not, from convincing Moammar Gadafi of Libya that they are Yemeni Muslims, to engaging in an outright cheating and misappropriating of funds collected from benevolent citizens of the world aimed at helping starving Ethiopians because of famine in much of the northern part of the country in the early eighties by callously pretending to be distributing food and medicine to the needy, to winning the trust of the West as champions of democracy. They are recklessly shame-proof in this regard and have a track record of being as deceitful as a professional con artist.

As is well known, the whole process – from the Election Board to registration, from media to vote counting, validation to certification – is under the full and total control of the ruling party/government. This election, as in elections past under this regime as well as the ones under Atse Haile Selassie and the Dergue were, and despite stipulations in the "Constitution" and Electoral Laws, and no matter what the regime says, is not going to be conducted in a transparent, free and fair manner. Because the processes were under the sole control of the governments in power, elections in Ethiopia so far have only one purpose and one purpose alone; that of keeping the governing entity in power in perpetuity. Therefore, given the undemocratic nature and behavior of the EPRDF regime, its track record in past elections and the manner in which this one is being run, one could safely assume that the outcome of election 2010 has been predetermined even before a single vote is cast.

Nonetheless, things may not be going the way the regime might have thought, prepared for since the last election debacle and so carefully calculated to win. For sure, in this election, the people are voting out of fear rather than good will, interest or hope for a better future, for farmers fear of not losing their small parcels of land and the chance to have access to fertilizers and basic services because the ruling party controls land as well as everything and every aspect of the people's life, and professionals for fear of not losing their jobs, business people for not losing their business permits, students for not losing the opportunity for better and higher education, etc.

As expected, opinions on this upcoming election abound and vary from one organization and political persuasion to another. Some have been advocating

boycotting it altogether, despite the fact that such proponents by in large have no way of actually effectuating their call for they have neither any plausible appeal nor organizational structure on the ground to be able to influence it in any noticeable manner or affect the outcome one way or the other. Some have lauded the political decision taken by AEUP and others for signing the so called Code of Conduct with the ruling party/government. Others support the position taken by the coalition of about eight organizations called Medrek for insisting on first and foremost negotiating with the government on the critical question of making the election free and fair, and for not signing the said document before there was a consensus on it and an agreement was reached at. Still others seem to take a wait and see approach.

Not few in number are totally dejected by the whole process they consider to be fraught with problems and participation in it as an exercise in futility, and some are disinterested as they believe that it is a done deal for TPLF/EPRDF is going to be declared the 'winner' anyway, and there is no point in bothering to run. Some who see things from the strategic perspective of the struggle that ultimately aim at empowering the people seem to have opted to look at this election as an opportunity and a means that, as a process, it should be appropriately put to maximum use to better organize themselves and enable the people to be at the front and center of the ongoing struggle. Of course, there are the ruling party's ignominious supporters who have convinced themselves that this election is going to be free, fair and democratic, and EPRDF is going to win "because it has a better plan for the country, and the opposition is incapable and not ready to govern ...". But some even have the audacity to blatantly claim that "anyway, it (EPRDF) deserves to win". How ridiculous and insane an assertion, indeed!

One thing EPRDF coterie of cadres and supporters should understand, however, is that power in a democratic society is vested in and belongs to the people and the people alone, and that it doesn't come as an entitlement to anyone individual or group. Never mind EPRDF leaders' stupefying arrogance and their ostensible claim as being earnestly engaged in "building democracy", there can absolutely be no democracy people can have faith in under a totalitarian ideology that the regime's leaders ascribe to and exercise as a system of government, called Revolutionary Democracy. Period!

The mostly nonchalant attitudes, outlandish claims and absurd counterclaims, false hopes and unrealizable dreams by many quarters, notwithstanding, the indomitable spirit and dogged determination of our people to stay united and empower themselves lives on. It is evident that leaders of EPRDF are neither willing nor capable of satisfying the democratic aspirations of our people. Given their belligerency and bellicosity, that is not

even in the realm of possibility. Because EPRDF could not do it, it was up to the opposition that has been unable to be a credible alternative force to fill the void and fulfill the democratic aspirations of our people. Still, this unyielding yearning of our people for equality, justice and unity is crying out for a principled, firm and unified alternative that could win their trust and deliver on its promises. As I have stated once before, this can only be realized if we depoliticize ethnicity, and have an unambiguous and very well defined long term strategy which puts the interests of our people and country above and beyond self, group or organization.

In a diverse society like ours with so complex and myriad of problems, in a growingly restive and highly volatile region with so many external hands with many conflicting interests vying for all kinds of influences, and a clear absence of a tangibly credible national alternative among the opposition that is ready and able to instill hope and lead the country out of this morass, the unmistakable brutality and unacceptable behavior of the regime alone cannot be strategically sound rational for change. We are once again witnessing some groups and amateurish individuals with such monocular strategy that are obsessed with and singularly focusing on the removal of the regime taking the most irresponsible and treasonous act of allying themselves with enemies of the state. By so doing they are in effect shortchanging the long term strategic interests of the country for short time gains amounting to nothing but a shortsighted hoopla. (I'll not dwell on this point as I've detailed my argument in a lengthy article titled, ([The Debate Over The Need or Inadvisability Of Cooperating With Isaias Afewerki.doc](#)). and another one in Amarigna ([The Debate, Personal Observation.pdf](#)).

In the final analysis, regardless of what is being said from all corners, this election may not turnout to be what some predict it to be; going either the way the government of Meles Zenawi wishes or what some so unrealistically optimistic folk aspire to see. It is, however, my cautious bet that, perhaps not to the full satisfaction of either the opposition or the ruling party, things are going to be different with different dynamics unfolding this time. This new political dynamics may not be a game changer in the immediate future or alter as who the "winner" of the election will be, but has all the essential ingredients that could create an enabling environment for Ethiopians to chart a new beginning. And I hope and pray that this will not be yet again an opportunity that would be squandered away.

Why do I say that? Well, let's briefly see what is different this time that was not in play in 2005. True, Ethiopians are not as enthusiastic and as hopeful about this election as they were in 2005. They are generally indifferent and to some extent resigned

to their fate and apathetic. They don't expect positive outcomes, and in fact many are dubious about it and others are fearful that things may worsen.

When we compare and contrast the overall situation surrounding the 2005 election with that of the upcoming 2010 national election, there are three major factors that were the sources of strength for the opposition in the former that are amiss this time, and three factors that could be sited as positive developments that we could consider to be more favorable to the opposition this time.

First, the following factors are not the same this time:

1. *The people factor:* Obviously, Ethiopians in general are not as enthusiastic, as hopeful, or as eager and as optimistic this time as they were about the 2005 election. People then were fully and actively engaged in the process, were full of anticipation and hope. Now, people are less hopeful, less sure and generally resigned. In 2005, Ethiopians for the first time in their history honestly believed that, finally, their vote was going to count and they were going to change things the way they wanted through the ballot box. This time, the people see participation in this election not a right to be exercised but as a government order to be complied with, they are not looking forward to it with anticipation and hope but with apprehension and anxiety.

2. *The opposition factor:* In 2005, the competitors were well defined among three distinct national groupings; EPRDF, UEDF and CUD (Kinijit), all three - each being composed of different organizations within it - run nationwide competitively. People knew where and for what each stood for, and the contrast was crisp. People for the first time had clear alternatives in the opposition parties they could trust, rally behind and fight for. This time it is quite a *mélange*, a hodgepodge. It is so frustrating and maddeningly incomprehensible that new organizations pop up every now and then. This phenomenon has become an intrinsic part of Ethiopian political landscape. And people seem to be cynically resigned to this fact. I'm still puzzled not only at the audacity of those who splinter away and form new parties each time a problem within an organization manifests itself, but at their followers, for these mostly demented souls would not have been able to do so had it not been for their support. When are we going to say enough is enough and force those who runaway and try to form a new organization with the same old ideas every time either their idea does get accepted or their egos are not tolerated to go back and settle their differences through civilized dialogue, and if they don't heed, to say goodbye to them? Frankly speaking, except may be for one or two, of the countless new organizations that came to being in the last 15 years or so, I've not come across any with new ideas. They are carbon copies of existing ones in new packaging. Political parties have mushroomed beyond comprehension since TPLF/EPRDF took over state power. The

proliferation of so called opposition parties in Ethiopia is incredible. There are over 90 registered political groups in Ethiopia now. And there is nothing the regime likes better as, on one hand, it brandishes them as testimony to the prevalence of a democratic system in the country, and on the other, the regime relishes the existence of so many political organizations at such laughable abundance as it uses them to further divide the opposition and to check on one another - beside being used to muddy the political field and hinder the activities of those that actually pose real challenge to its misrule.

Aside from other factors, the mere fact that the opposition is so divided gives EPRDF a chance to win without actually garnering a majority number of the total votes cast, or even without resorting to and involving itself with massive fraud and vote rigging. That is what happened to the opposition in Kenya, where the then ruling party, KANU, won with only 40.6 % to the fragmented opposition that was able to get a whopping 59.3% of the total vote in the 1997 national election. So, at present, the way opposition parties are, even if a great majority of people deny EPRDF their vote and cast for the opposition, EPRDF can still win de facto. Can anyone blame the people for not voting for the opposition or blame them for their continued misery under Meles & Co.? I don't think so.

3. The government factor: In 2005, the government miscalculated by grossly overestimating the support it thought it had especially from rural areas (farmers), wrongly believed that its policy of ethnically dividing Ethiopians had taken hold to guarantee its dominance, misjudged the level of dissatisfaction the people of Ethiopia had and highly underestimated the extent of their determination to get rid of it through the ballot box. Because of these gross miscalculations, the rulers where as stupefyingly surprised about the results as they were nervously angered about the level of dejection. They did not waste any moment to unjustly declare not only victory the very night of the election before all ballots were in and even before its subservient Electoral Board had said a word, but also war on the opposition and their supporters. In 2005, the ruling party was not prepared for a result that was both a total rebuke of their policies and an affirmation of the power of an undivided and unified people had. Because of their unpreparedness for such a stunning defeat, the regime reacted beastly and forced itself to further alienate the people. It struggled to adjust to the new reality of ruling people that unequivocally rejected it the only way it chose and knew how, through brute force.

Secondly, the following factors are new this time.

1. The Tgrai factor: One new phenomenon this time and the one that has clearly gone outside the regime's prevue is that TPLF is seriously facing real challenge in Tgrai for the first time since it came to state power. The people

of Tgrai, like their compatriots elsewhere in the country, now seem to have a real chance to be able to actively and openly participate in this election with the possibility of, for the first time, openly electing for the opposition instead of TPLF. TPLF had always considered Tgrai and its people as its backyard and practically kept it off limits to other organizations, hence denying the people their fundamental right to free choice. Defying the usual cantankerous and deviously relentless campaign of intimidation, outright mischief including violence by TPLF coterie of cadres, this time the people of Tgrai are taking the courageous step of enthusiastically welcoming the opposition. This, obviously, has, more than anything the opposition has so far done, unnerved and caught the regime off guard. There is nothing more worrisome and seriously challenging to Meles & Co's hold on to power than losing even part of their watertight control in Tgrai. Through wide ranging web of spying and administrative networks, reminiscent of Stalinist era organizational structures and other controlling mechanisms, TPLF had, albeit in the name of the struggle and the "interest" of the people, managed to isolate Tgrai from the rest of the country, keeping it as the organization's fiefdom and exclusive club. It is true that under TPLF, Tigray has seen, by in large, more economic activities and infrastructure than other parts of the country, but, despite some misinformed assertions, there is no group of people in Ethiopia more suffocatingly denied basic rights like freedom of expression, association, etc. under TPLF/EPRDF than the people of Tgrai.

Yes, there were opposition candidates from Tgrai in the 2005 election - 88 candidates fielded by UEDF (EDU) alone (only to be forced by the regime to withdraw just few weeks before the election). But this time it is different. And the reason is not because the people of Tgrai have "finally" had had enough of Meles/TPLF as some naively suggest, but the fact that there is the Arena/Seyee factor that the regime finds absolutely difficult to curb let alone stop the people of Tgrai from listening to and ending their support to it. There is, for example, nothing Meles and his cohorts could talk of the 17 year struggle that Arena/Seyee could not. The best Meles and his regime could muster to do is accuse them of "allying themselves with chauvinists". This kind of rubbish propaganda definitely will have no acceptance as the people know better. The real thing now to be concerned about is what and how the regime would be reacting at this new phenomenon.

As magnificent and encouraging as this long overdue development in Tgrai is, and as truly unnerving, worrisome and unsettling as it is to the regime, it is not irreversible for one major and another minor reasons. The first is that, prior to this election the regime could do all it could to discredit first and then do all it can to derail the candidacy of prominent individuals and hinder any substantive gains by any of the opposition that it suspects can have credible following in Tgrai. The tactics to be employed by

the regime would be to clamp down on strong supporters and incapacitate opposition activities and force them to withdraw, or render them unable to get the winning votes they definitely would otherwise. But in case that falters, it is more than plausible that the regime could resort to taking drastic measures of selectively arresting some of the prominent individuals now actively working for and in the opposition. Unfortunately, there is a very misguided, active and unprecedented level of agitation against those same individuals that have become real thorns on the neck of Meles & Co. by none other than some in the opposition. Oddly enough, these groups and individuals are in good company and, indeed in cahoots, with Isaias and Sheabia as regards to the similarity of this venomous campaign on those individuals opposed to the regime.

The second and more drastic measure the unpredictable and nervous leaders of the regime could take, especially after the election, is to instigate a pretext that could serve as a diversion by taking the national worry and focus on something that overshadows the election or any illegal and unjustifiable measure the regime might take with a possibility of proclaiming state of emergency. One of these could be a conflict with Eritrea, a prospect that Isaias would be a willing participant, if not an initiator.

2. The international factor:- As time goes on, we are witnessing creeping discord developing between PM Meles Zenawi and his otherwise firm foreign supporters. As such, the regime, at least for now, is at loggerheads and in an apparent open confrontation with the West, particularly the United States. For too long, the regime's leaders have taken the West's support for granted and whenever its dismal failings - be it in policy or unacceptable acts like actual human rights abuses - are pointed out, even in a mild and non-offensive tone and manner, they have been reacting like a spoiled child.

During the last national election in 2005, foreign powers, especially the United States and Europe had applied certain diplomatic pressures on the regime to make the election process as free and fair as possible. Attitudes of those democratic nations towards the opposition were markedly positive soon after the formation by 15 political organizations of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) in 2003, as a result of which the government of Meles Zenawi was compelled to start negotiations with it (UEDF) about the electoral process. Those talks between the two negotiating teams (EPRDF's team led by Ato Bereket Simion and UEDF's by Dr. Beyene and Dr. Merera alternately) resulted in making substantial changes to existing electoral laws and general conduct of the election, including presence of foreign observers, use of media, registration, public rallies, etc. Serious negotiations between the two sides were continuing on some of the 29 serious and important items, including reforming the Electoral Board, that UEDF had tabled, until they

were abruptly suspended by the EPRDF negotiating team following an announcement by the newly formed Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) that it did not need to negotiate with EPRDF about anything as there existed a favorable condition to conduct free and fair elections and were ready for the election anyway. That was the end of any meaningful and serious negotiations. This time things, obviously, have changed.

The first one of this evolving discord is triggered by the regime's oversensitivity over any sort of criticism and its overarching urge to control free expression way beyond its borders that recently led it to jam VOA broadcasts to Ethiopia and the boorish and childish arrogant manner in which its recidivist leader tried to justify why his government did so, has demonstrably strained relations between the US and the EPRDF regime.

The swift decision by this US government-financed world-wide broadcast service, the VOA, to channel its broadcast through satellite services is both a deserving rebuke to the regime's continued policy of muzzling free expression, and to the delight of Ethiopians, a principled stand expected of a democratic nation that stands for the cardinal principle of freedom of expression and the free press. As could be expected, the reaction of the regime to the swift measure of the VOA in reaction to its unacceptable, intolerable and irrational behavior was symptomatically a further aggravating defiance. Of course, the significance of this friction over the VOA jamming alone could not be taken as something that would permanently affect, substantially derail or even dampen the very important and strategic relations between the two countries. But it is symptomatic of the growing uneasiness of democratic countries over the regime's increasingly brazen dictatorial behavior.

The second point of friction is over US State Department's annual report on human rights, where the regime's record on human rights including the case of political prisoners was once again exposed. The regime, again as usual, in denial of the truth, is dismissive of the report as untrue and reacted as defiantly as ever, but this time was more openly condemnatory and aggressive.

The third and more serious one, in addition to its growingly undemocratic overall internal policies and some possible tactical differences in regard to the problem in Somalia, is its cozily warming of relations with China that seems to be growingly and substantively deepening. Consistent with the intensity and depth of China's involvement in Africa, its influence in Ethiopia is far greater and more substantive than most may have understood it to be. China's involvement in Africa is not simply growing by leaps and bounds but very well entrenched. Of course, with that comes its unbounded influence. EPRDF leaders' flirtation with China can be more than an opportunistic and

a reactive gimmick aimed at enticing the West to either continue to overlook their undemocratic practices and keep giving them unbridled aid, than an ideological one.

That may not surprise some of us, given the leaders' ideological background and their core political philosophy they practice, beside their track record of sudden and drastic shift in their political affiliation whenever they feel the pinch or find it politically beneficial, as was evident in their otherwise unthinkable overnight jump from self-proclaimed hard-line Albanian Marxist to free market democrats when they saw the writing on the wall. TPLF leaders, therefore, have absolutely no qualms whatsoever with suddenly changing their political line. Given the prevailing unsettling situation in the region and Ethiopia's current indispensableness coupled with the temporary absence of a clear national alternative in the opposition camp, this kind of behavior should only be expected and the timing cannot be any better for Meles Zenawi. What the regime's leaders have learnt from the relationship of Sudan and Zimbabwe with China cannot be overlooked. It seems obvious to me that the regime's leaders are consciously and intensely engaged in a serious effort towards formally turning the country into a one party state. That is what one can extrapolate from the intention, behavior and actions of the regime, especially since the last national election.

Meles Zenawi may feel, to some extent justifiably, that he has come to a point where he may do better with China and without the West. Taking into account the gradual but steady and systematic attitudinal shift of the regime's leaders toward China and the overall disconcerting and worrisome regional situation, it may not be unreasonable to postulate that Meles may have convinced himself that the West may need him more than he needs the West. His every so often frivolous charge against some in the opposition for being "neo-liberal" and 'neo-colonial" henchmen whenever they question his regime's policy on human rights abuses and other wrong doings, is one evidence for his lack of commitment to democratic principles and ideals. Or he is truly showing his authoritarian pedigree and real passion for Stalinist values.

To be continued in Part II

To be continued....