

Growth & Unrest Said To Taunt Ethiopia in 2010: The Contradictions the Nation Has Become

By Genet Mersha, February, 13, 2010

PART V

Crystal gazing 2010

The World in 2010, a publication by *The Economist*, foresees a number of situations that can possibly come to pass this year and the factors shaping them around the world. Fiscal deficits in a number of developed countries and sovereign debts are beclouding prospects for faster global economic recovery. Therefore, emerging markets, along with the East, are seen to help jumpstart flagging economies in the North and elsewhere. Huge northern and Eastern investments are expected in these markets, at least for a while.

Inevitably, this shift in wealth would not go unnoticed or without creating ripples. *The World in 2010* anticipates rising unemployment, with sixty million more jobless people than in 2008 worldwide. Setting its lens on UN-ILO estimates, the magazine says 200 million people would face risk of falling on income less than \$2 a day.

In view of the above, the electorates in democratic countries are expected to exercise their sovereign rights to punish individuals and governments considered responsible for their plights. In countries where expressions of dissent or grievances cannot go unpunished, anger may find its own ways, despite the offer of true to form regularity of elections and official declarations affirming peoples' sovereignty to exercise their theoretical rights.

Of the 166 countries whose situations have been put under the microscope, 77 "States of combustibility" have been identified—22 of them under "very high" risk of social unrest, 34 under "high" risk, including Ethiopia. Whereas only two countries are seen as having "low" risks in the whole African continent, Chad, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Sudan and Zimbabwe have topped the "very high" risk group.

In making its case for social unrests, *The World in 2010* lists a whole gamut of tinderboxes such as "the degree of income inequality, the state of governance, levels of social provision, ethnic tensions, public trust in institutions, the history of unrest and type of political system ("intermediate" regimes that are neither consolidated democracies nor autocracies seem the most vulnerable." That much, at least, the crystal gazing by *The World in 2010* seems to share our own worst fears for our country.

Thus, the 2010 story is a narrative of contradictions. Its "Top Growers" list in order of ranks 1-11 is populated by small and fragile economies, except China and India. Once again, Ethiopia pops up in fifth place as fastest grower. Whereas this recognition is of some magnitude by the researchers and editors of the magazine, their conclusion that the government party would pocket the election outcome in May is rather judgmental than compliment. Strong sentiments have already been expressed that is "victory" should impose on Ethiopian leaders the added responsibility of seeking in earnest a social contract with the people, a vital cog that has so far been missing in the wheels of their claims to good governance, despite their many denials and obdurate resistance.

The World in 2010's testimony of positive growth prospects in Ethiopia is likely to arouse expectations amongst citizens. However, notice that beyond the headline and the details of the numbers, its forecast is deliberately accentuated with implied concerns over its sustainability and the economy's lack of internal dynamism. It states, "As the global economy emerges from recession most of the leading performers in 2010 will be minor emerging markets, especially aid-driven countries in Sub-Saharan Africa." It then attributes Ethiopia's to IMF's financial support on one hand and favourable weather for agriculture on the other that could make it "one of the world's fastest-growing economies" this year.

Amplifying the contradictions

Often, there emerges an image in the mind's eye, mostly distinguishable for its contradictions. Tensions between divergent visions in the country between citizens and government, hunger in the midst of possibilities and great

prospects for growth, society and the environment and the nation's hopes and despairs becoming grits to the mills of its daily life and its frustrations, mostly nourished by unfulfilled promises and unrealised dreams.

On the canvas are, therefore, invective and rage against the state for its total surrender of its powers and institutions to authoritarianism that neither has willingness to listen, nor is imaginative or show respect to their wishes or things they consider sacrosanct. This has begat citizens' distrust and resentment against government. Consequently, today, there are three categories of victims in Ethiopia, some of them as memories: (a) a society condemned to repression; (b) government that lacks credibility and unsuccessful in its quest for legitimacy by other means and, (c) the many lives cut short by the state and those that have been and continue to be unlawfully seized and languish in prisons.

This is a story of the constant collisions between Ethiopian aspirations and the resistance that shapes its path to the future. Rest assured, the tensions would continue until limits are set once and for all on government and political parties to ensure that their leaders and institutions at the federal, regional levels and further down do not abuse their powers and violate the rights and freedoms of citizens and get away with impunity, as it has been happening for a long time now.

Fortunately, the country's strengths lie in its vibrancy, determination and willingness to keep on trying to change things for the better for all its citizens. More importantly, it is a youthful nation and at the same time one of the oldest in the world. It is modest, mature and patient; it would hardly give in to defeat or discouragement, as it strives to realise its dreams with its own efforts.

Lekatit 11 must afford opportunity for reflection

Not that every crystal gazing would come true, but as the TPLF is preparing to celebrate its 35th anniversary, there is an imperative need for looking beyond presumptuousness and suspicion, division and secretiveness, and its constant search for enemies. Common sense should dictate on this occasion, after nearly twenty years in power, the TPLF should now summon courage and subject itself to honest introspection with a view to getting a handle on how to make its peace with society.

On the eve of its 35th anniversary, a huge wall stands between citizens and the Front. So far, it seems it is still in a business as usual mode. Interestingly, as part of its propaganda campaign TPLF's *aigaforum.com* writes, "TPLF's strength comes from its popularity among the Tigrean people" (*Tigray gears to celebrate Lekatit 11 in a grand style.*"). If this is a sign of coming to terms with the truth, about the organisation's unpopularity in the country, the openness is welcome. That certainly is the case, partly on account of its ethnic policies and what that has entailed to the country and its citizens. Evidence of that is, how much it has weaved together its organisational skills and freedom with the truth to exploit the state's inherent monopoly and capacity to unleash violence through these past decades to realise its narrow and parochial objectives.

If, however, Aiga's is a response to the unguarded confidence by Ato Syee Abraha's early claim of anticipated victory as preferred candidate of the people of Tembien/Tigray, it means ever since his article TPLF must have been in nightmares. Even Ato Meles is now involved in giving his antidote, when a few days ago he spoke to the people of Tigray [WIC interview in Tigrigna] telling them that opposition parties are remnants of the past and stand to defend interests of the Dergue and OLF! In his words, **"once they [Seyee, Gebru...] left Woyane the only choice left for them was to join Dergue and OLF remnants!** And, they have joined these forces in broad day light today!" [Source and emphasis *aigaforum.com*]. What does the underlying message of the prime minister say about inter-ethnic relations on the eve of the election?

What is troubling mostly is how far the love of power pushes good people to distort reality to serve their needs of the moment. Does truth have a revolving door to come and go as one wish? After all, it should not be surprising

that Aigaforum had to indulge in another harebrained political dupery, especially the inference of which is Tigray is monolithic behind the TPLF. It is TPLF's right to defend its truth, as it sees fit. How about integrity that the public has dying to see in all these years?

Come to think of it; the TPLF should not have chafed too much over losing Tembein to Seyee or Mekelle to Gebru Asrat and a few other woredas in Tigray in the election, if at all it could allow that. If anything, that would only invigorate parliament a little bit more, whose sessions otherwise have been dull, dreary and its decisions pre-tailored. The election of new and experienced candidates would only engender sensible deliberations and exchange of views that would encourage other parliamentarians to give primacy to the interests of the country, instead of the ruling party. This is assuming that we would not read any article in the foreign media that TPLF imitating the Gambian president to warn Tembienites, Mekellians, etc., if they side the opposition, "I will develop the areas that vote for me, but if you don't vote for me, don't expect anything!"

Anyways, this year's TPLF 35th anniversary would be celebrated in the presence of 250,000 invited guests and visitors in Mekelle. It would not only be an occasion of chronological age of the organisation and survival, but also a warming up for an 'electoral victory' that is already in hand, sealed with muscles of the ruling party, codified with the code of conduct that has ensured its total control over the election processes since it started it five years ago.

Add to this is, how exceptionally good 2009 has been to EFFORT; its coffers are overflowing. Especially notable are successes registered by Guna, Messboe, Addis Pharmaceutical, Alemeda, EXTRAN, Wegagen, TransEthiopia, Ezana and SUR Construction. For instance, of the several private companies engaged in exports of cereals, oilseeds and spices, Guna stood first with \$31 million profits and was acknowledged with first place award (*Reporter* 31 Dec).

Why is that? Because the first agreement, among others, to expand trade with China (Shandong Province) by a non-government entity was signed with EFFORT, what they called "Strategic Cooperation" agreement at Mekelle in November 2008. This enabled especially Guna and Alemda to take advantage of the market opportunities to export to China oilseeds, among others, according to EFFORT's *Untitled Document*. All along, Ethiopia's major exports destination was Europe, until it was overtaken by Asia since early 2009, perhaps owing to this agreement.

EFFORT Benefitting from trade agreement signed with China							
Goods	China as export destination for Ethiopian goods in 2008-2009 (in percentages)			Goods	Europe as export destination for Ethiopian goods in 2008-2009 (in percentages)		
	1 st Quarter	2 nd quarter	3 rd Quarter		1 st Quarter	2 nd quarter	3 rd Quarter
Oilseeds	13.5	33.5	37.6	Coffee	46.2	38.4	39.6
Leather				Flowers			
Leather products				Gold			
NB:- *The total share of Asian imports of Ethiopian exports in 3rd quarter was 39.8%				Pulses			
*China has been importing around 200 tons of coffee annually (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and some from Tanzania) for processing. NBE reports do not indicate that (<i>crienlish.com</i>).		Sugarcane					
		Textiles, garments					
		Leather products					

Source: Quarterly reports of the National Bank of Ethiopia (NBE)

It is only thirteen months later, a new preferential market access agreement was unveiled inter-country level last month. This agreement would allow Ethiopia to put 95 percent of its exports free of tariff levies. Included in this is also the understanding to boost trade exchanges by \$3 billion by 2015. Over the past eight years, trade volume

between the two countries has been growing by 35.6 per cent on average, according to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the balance of which every year has been hugely in favour of China. Not that it has changed the trade imbalance, but Guna and Alemda have by now consolidated their hold in the Chinese market with the appropriate contacts, information and other services, while it would take a long and persistent efforts and productivity improvements for others to gain toehold in that market.

Says Ken Ohashi, World Bank Country Director for Ethiopia and Sudan, “In Ethiopia, the lack of competition allows many firms with low productivity to survive, and that learning from the best firms is limited. This keeps the overall productivity level of the economy low.” Similarly, Sweden tried to discourage the practice referred to above, citing of lack of separation between government and its business the implications which to credibility and legitimacy is huge, as follows.

“From the point of view of efficient competition, as indicated by the experience from the transport sector and revealed in the surveys about the business climate mentioned above, the close relation between TPLF and the present Ethiopian government easily creates doubts about the equal treatment of EFFORT-companies and other non-party-related private companies. As there is no efficient and working commercial legislation, these doubts, well founded or not, easily create problems concerning the government’s legitimacy and the credibility of its private sector policies.”

SIDA Country Economic Report 2004

Consequently, as in yesterday, what is lacking today is the ability to reason out to see, if there are any lessons to be learned from past mistakes, or how to win the trust and confidence of citizens. Without it, the nation’s spirit and the possibilities before its children continue to slip away—for everyone. Events seem to head now slowly along that direction, especially at the beginning of a new decade that is anticipated to be more difficult from the point of view of the clouds hovering over the world economy, rising levels of discontents, potentials for conflicts, and political and security issues both internal and external. These have direct and negative implications for Ethiopia.

A state is always as strong as the confidence it inspires in its citizens. The fabrics of that are sensibility and integrity in leadership, commitment to fairness and justice and the protection of citizens in every respect. The fact that government exercises full control over citizens and their resources does not mean it has their loyalty or support for its ways. In fact, intransigence is dumb, as is sheer reliance on force. They are of no help when it comes to fostering genuine bond between citizens and the institutions of power. Power could help leaders to make any decisions they want, as have many mad and powerful people have done. However, power is real when those assuming leadership also own a nation’s past and its values. This would enable them to shepherd it forward with their support and without repeating past mistakes. That is a path to toward a better future that all Ethiopians that they richly deserve.

Finally, while wishing Tigreans more wisdom, humility and sensitiveness on this Lekatit anniversary, I do hope for all our children’s sakes, they would encourage the TPLF as the core of the government to see Ethiopia beyond ethnicity, the nation’s patience that is taken for weakness and its arcane reserve, whose façade of calmness is deceptive.