

Behind Ethiopia's Changing Political Dynamics

The *Improving Sociopolitical Climate*

Ethiopia seems to be on the move. There are good signs, encouraging steps. There are increasingly identifiable expressions of collective catharsis and cheerfulness. This could be observed in different trends currently characterizing Ethiopia. Many Ethiopians, both locally and abroad, are taking the opportunity as a safety valve to decades long silenced voice and tension. We could easily see this in the many pro-reform demonstrations in different parts of Ethiopia and abroad. Similarly, perhaps for the first time in Ethiopian modern history, state-owned and other media platforms are beginning to converge on many issues. There may no longer be a media solely serving the state and other media outlets, both those locally based and abroad, may not always simply recycle narratives, discourses, and documentaries against what they consider as the status quo [1]. There is a growing interest in human rights, peaceful coexistence, a focus on hope, optimism, and some unclear form of "Ethiopian nationalism" (except that there are contradictory readings of this, some pointing out that this is something new and others considering it essentially the same as what was already associated with the "unity" school).

Probably the same thing can be said for many of the political parties. Apart from locally functioning opposition political parties, others who took a more gun-driven struggle in neighboring countries are also choosing more of moderate, peaceful, and inclusive approaches [2]. Like the media, there is also a growing convergence of tendencies among the various political and interest groups. This ranges from a demand for smooth political transition, unwavering support for Dr. Abiy's (and the associated vanguard's) reform efforts, and expanding the political landscape. Ongoing efforts directed at settling religious based sensibilities are also likely to yield positive outcomes. Reconciliation efforts are underway to help resolve conflicts between quarreling elements between, on the one hand, the Ethiopian Muslims' representative committee and the allegedly pro-government Ethiopia's Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), and on the other hand, the two Orthodox Synods based in Ethiopia and North America. These are, simply put, some of the encouraging developments evolving in Ethiopia.

What May Account for this?

Ethiopia is going through the process of rapid transformation. There are, as noted above, changes at meso and macro levels. In addition to the relatively encouraging political reforms and other "symptoms alleviations" within Ethiopia, the regional stability of the Horn of Africa seems to be a practical possibility. We are seeing steps promising productive avenues. Optimism is on the rise in the relentless friction between worrying elements in South Sudan and Ethio-Eritrean peaceful rapprochement. What factor(s), however, underlie (s) this development in the Horn of Africa? In the following paragraphs, I examine the relative efficacy of four highly intertwined important factors underpinning the recent transformations affecting Ethiopia in particular and the Horn of Africa in general. The proceeding discussion addresses the first causal factor behind the advent of current changes in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

1. The Growing Ineptness of the TPLF Dominated EPRDF

Ruling Ethiopia for more than a quarter of a century, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government has been functioning in the context of cognitive dissonance. On the one hand stood its long-lasting legacies and development-oriented policies and actual achievements, and on the other hand, are the deteriorating conditions for human and democratic rights, increased regional imbalances, unfair resource and power distributions, unabated levels of corruption, unbridled food insecurity and poverty, and so forth.

It is, however, absolutely incorrect to generalize that TPLF did nothing in Ethiopia. There are many things we can enumerate that actually owe to the leadership and policies of EPRDF under TPLF. Despite questions of quality, education and related institutions have expanded much faster in quantity than ever in the country. There are indeed, as TPLF has always claimed on state media, many universities in Ethiopia than ever before. Well, in as much as the increase in the quantity of universities, the problems associated with them have also at least increased along with them. Relatively encouraging steps have been taken to develop physical infrastructures, such as roads and buildings, at least mainly in major cities in the country.

Another bold legacy that seems to attract TPLF's friends and foes alike is the mega project of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (known also as "Millennium" Dam and sometimes as "Hidase" Dam). Although it is yet to be completed, there is less of a disagreement that it remains TPLF's major achievement and contribution in Ethiopia. The site for this dam is located around 500 km northwest of the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, in the Benishangul Gumuz region, along the Blue Nile. Once completed, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam will become the largest dam in Africa. It will be 1,800 m long, 155 m high and with an estimated total volume of 74, 000 m³. Then, it is planned that it will generate a total installed power of 6,000 Megawatt (MW) and estimated production of 15,000 Gigawatt hours (GWh) per year. Except for its unintended or undesired political (and economic) implications for regional actors, such as Egypt and Sudan, its potential for transforming Ethiopia is beyond reasonable doubt. Ethiopian citizens, poor and rich, residing locally and abroad, have contributed what they can for this grand project. Many are hoping that this could potentially shorten the years and efforts needed to make Ethiopia among world's middle-income countries.

Yet, while these changes were good and encouraging, the TPLF's government was making its time of rule shorter than it hoped. Concerns for the breach of human and democratic rights among opposition political parties, NGOs, human rights activists, Ethiopian citizens both from within Ethiopia and abroad, and international rights groups go unnoticed and often suppressed. Questions for the equal and fair distribution of resources, both political and economic, among various ethnic groups, mainly among the Oromo, handled through incarcerations, unlawful killings, tortures, and brutality. Religious groups', particularly, Muslims' "disciplined" concern for religious freedom and non-government intervention in religious matters helped the government's already wicked tendency of misusing "terrorism and radicalism" in Ethiopia to its benefit. These disappointments joined with the unabated levels of corruption and inflation in virtually every single sectors and institutions in the country; massive emigration of the productive age group from Ethiopia; political instability in Ethiopia and along the Horn of Africa due to the hardliner and militaristic policies; and all other conditions and ways that, conventionally, led to dictatorship and totalitarian tendencies prematurely killed TPLF's hope for much longer years of "rule".

As one theory notes, collapsing states (more broadly empires and civilizations) in their final stages generally tend to prefer and employ force and military. This is so mainly because "Universal States" (Toynbee claimed) are negative institutions wherein the creative minority ends up becoming dominant minority. These people, instead of devolving creative solutions to perceived or actual problems and challenges, are more prone to violence and force. This, for Toynbee, marks the beginning of the end. However, TPLF is yet to be seen for its mechanisms of survival in the OPDO (Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization) dominated EPRDF. It is unlikely that it will wither away at any time soon. However, observation from current events in Ethiopia dictates that TPLF may no longer be desired as it is unless it is ready to transfigure itself into something that could pass and survive all what it had done for the last 27 years. It is surely difficult if not impossible.

Author: Dr. Mukerrem is an Ethiopian published author researching religion, ethnicity, and identity politics in the Horn of Africa, and the theoretical link between religion and civilization. He can be reached at mukeremmifta@gmail.com.

References

- [I] For a fairly detailed assessment of the current media outlets in Ethiopia, see http://insamer.com/en/mass-media-in-todays-ethiopia-threat-or-opportunity_1515.html (June 04, 2018).
- [II] Ethiopian politics in the context of (regional politics) the Horn of Africa in light of the advent of Dr. Abiy Ahmed. See <https://addisstandard.com/commentary-legitimacy-at-home-is-legitimacy-abroad> (July 03, 2018).