

A Race to the Bottom: Proud Ethiopia at Risk

--Why Ethiopians must unite-----

Aklog Birara (DR)

As a prelude to the predictable collapse of Mengistu Hailemariam's Socialist Military Dictatorship two years before the TPLF/EPRDF took power in 1991, the Associated Press wrote the following ominous report. "Nearly the entire high command of this Marxist government has been killed." If you liquidate your entire defense command, it goes without saying that what follows is state and government collapse. AP could have added at the same time that, almost the entire population of Ethiopia had revolted against and rejected the regime. Today, the heroic and proud people of Gondar are making history by defying the TPLF Security and Defense apparatus that only caters to its creator, the TPLF. The peaceful and honorable protestors urged all Ethiopians to join the popular struggle for justice, genuine equality, national unity and sovereignty and a rapid transition to a democratic state and government. The people of Ethiopia are speaking with a loud and unified voice that the TPLF repressive state and government machine is no longer acceptable. Political elites and opposition groups better wake up from their slumber that the people are far ahead and unify their assets.

From this popular revolt that defied the cruel and punishment prone TPLF state and government machine we learn that a regime that does not capture the hearts and minds of the population that it governs has essentially lost the legitimacy to rule. No one respects it; let alone accept it. Its downfall is therefore predictable. My interest is this. This loss of the social and human capital base created and nurtured by the TPLF makes Ethiopia vulnerable regardless of the security and defense establishment the current ruling party deploys. This bloated, well-paid, well-endowed narrow ethnic based Security, Defense and Diplomatic machine is no longer invincible. Nevertheless, it has enormous capacity to kill Ethiopians. It had earlier failed to preserve Ethiopia's access to the sea. It had abandoned its obligation to defend Ethiopia's territorial integrity with the Sudan. It had failed to defend Gambella from foreign attack. In all cases, it acquiesced to the dictates of the self-absorbed and self-serving TPLF rather defending the national interests of Ethiopia and its people.

Mistrust of State and Government is Consequential

The consequence of **public mistrust** in the state and government at a time of external threat is huge. It has far reaching effects on the fabric of Ethiopian society, the lives of the vast majority of the population and the security of the country. No sustainable and equitable growth can take place under this condition. This is why experts suggest that no regime can afford to punish its population and explain away the relentless punishment of ordinary people as a response to external "subversive and terrorist forces." In short, the state and government have become the problem. When you kill, maim, imprison, evict and dispossess citizens; you subvert the socioeconomic, cultural and political bonds that hold the population together. You undermine the essential capacity of the country to withstand external threat. A society whose social fabric

is broken through relentless repression and ethnic divide and rule lends itself to external threat and to a failed state. This is inevitable. In effect, TPLF repressive responses suggest that **deep seated and systemic** problems can be resolved through the use of force rather than through political reform including a transitional government of national unity that will lead to shared political power and ultimately to a free and fair election; and the formation of a genuine democratic state and government. Trying to quell popular unrests in Gambella, the Omo Valley, the Ogaden, Oromia and Amhara regions -----whose root causes are the system and government—through state violence is a losing proposition. Aside from the important domestic socioeconomic and political turmoil it creates, the suppression and alienation of the vast majority of the population emboldens external enemies (See **Freedom House, Ethiopia: Attack on Civil Society Escalates as Dissent Spreads**, July 23, 2016).

“Ethiopia’s perceived stability and its much-touted role in the global fight against terrorism in the Horn of Africa are at stake if EPRDF continues to ignore the dangers of suppressing citizens’ legitimate demands (Gondar, Oromia, Gambella and the Omo Valley) **for inclusive and accountable governance**. Any economic progress can only be sustained with a genuine commitment to political reform that adequately responds to the demands of Ethiopia’s diverse political, ethnic, and religious groups at all levels of public life.” You can’t be a regional leader against terrorism while “terrorizing your own people,” said one foreign expert in a conversation about the subject. Freedom House explains the essence of the chronic system-driven problem 101 million Ethiopians face and calls for a radical political reform now and not tomorrow. Simply put, Ethiopia’s vulnerability is compounded several fold by the current system of ethnic enclaves and unbelievable state-sponsored atrocities. It is madness.

This leads me to my own assessment of the external threat that is out there for anyone who reads the Arab, especially the Egyptian media on a regular basis. Long before the TPLF/EPRDF took power, this same media opined and supported the secession of Eritrea and did all it could to make this happen. It had a willing partner in TPLF that facilitated secession that led to Ethiopia being one of the largest countries in the world to be land locked. The TPLF is now teaching children that Eritrea was never part of Ethiopia. It is also teaching them that the lands the TPLF snatched from Wollo and Gondar are historically part of Tigray. In the case of the former, it is even debatable that the ultimate beneficiaries of secession are Eritreans. The Gulf States and Saudi Arabia are achieving their goal of weakening Ethiopia by establishing their predominance over the entire Red Sea. Incidentally, this is what Saddam Hussein had vowed in supporting Eritrean secession. A quarter of a century later, the same Arab media chorus has focused on Ethiopia’s construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), whose completion is not that far. While I have consistently supported Ethiopia’s legitimate right to harness its rivers in support of its 101 million people, especially through irrigated farming, I am not convinced that the beneficiaries of the GERD will be Ethiopians. It certainly will be TPLF elites and the Sudanese. **The dam is inches away from the Sudan border for a strategic reason, TPLF’s and not Ethiopia’s.** Does anyone really know why the dam was not built far inland?

Egypt's Daily News covers the story of the dam on a constant basis. In its latest coverage, it acknowledges that the GERD is 70 percent complete. Academics and experts present a constant barrage of criticism not only against Ethiopia but also the government of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi. Simply put, the Arab World's media blitz against the GERD is "war-like and vicious." Professor Nader Noor El-Din, a water resources expert at Cairo University argues that consultation and negotiation is "useless." Instead, "Noor El-Din suggested that Egypt should resort to the International Court and the UN Security Council to prove the potential risks of the construction of the dam on Egypt's access to water." He further contends that "If potential harm was proven later on (after completion), Egypt would not be able to take legal action." The likelihood that the International Court or the UN Security Council would dispute Ethiopia's position to harness its waters for its own development is almost nil. The question is what, if any, is Egypt's option B?

In the "**Coming War: Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Nile**," March 30, 2016, Malcom Dash quotes Egyptian and pro-Egyptian alarmists as experts. "Egypt is totally dependent on the Nile. Without it, there is no Egypt." This is only an assertion. No one can predict the impact of the GERD on the flow of water to Egypt. Here is the problem. Egypt is used to "be the dominant power in the region for 200 years" by excluding Ethiopia, the primary source of Nile waters. Although Ethiopia was a sovereign state at the time, the water has been regulated by a 1959 Agreement with the Sudan. "This agreement allotted nothing to Ethiopia and other riparian states." It was therefore inevitable that black African states would renegotiate the agreement; and they did. The New Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement that black African states signed and Egypt rejected makes it possible for Ethiopia and other black African nations to harness their waters, including building dams. This new agreement has "shaken things up in the region." Dash argues that "Egypt now finds itself without any right of inspection in the GERD...and without a right of veto." I believe Egypt must recognize and embrace the new agreement of sharing the waters of the Nile. If there is decrease in its allotment so what?

The problem is this. Egypt still feels that its "historical and natural rights" position is legitimate. "While officials here (in Cairo) hope for a diplomatic solution to diffuse the crisis, security sources say Egypt's military leadership is **prepared to use force to protect** its stake in the river." This will be a disaster for all concerned.

Colonialism is gone but Egypt's colonial position persists

In my estimation, Egypt's position of "**historical and natural rights**" over the Abbay won't be tenable in both in the International Court or the UN Security Council because of precedents; and because African riparian states have agreed on the New Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement of fair and equitable use (see a successive of articles I have written on the subject). Sadly and contrary to this Agreement, the Sisi government has launched an ambitious program of agricultural production against a background of water scarcity. Surprisingly, Egypt has also embarked upon the creation of the Al-Salam Canal "to transport water from the Nile to the

Sinai” while 20 million Ethiopians starve and Ethiopia’s need for irrigated agriculture is compelling and a must for survival.

In short, Egyptian academics and experts have not moved an inch from Egypt’s colonial position:

1. “Historical and natural rights” of water share and insistence that there should not be any decrease;
2. Insistence that the GERD is not used for anything else other than the generation of electricity; and
3. Egyptian authority to monitor the construction of the GERD that abrogates Ethiopia’s security, long-term national interests and sovereignty.

In my estimation, Ethiopia’s legitimate right to harness and utilize its rivers for generating electric power and for irrigation on a massive scale is incontestable. However, the current internal political turmoil and the inability of the TPLF to address it in a fundamental way wisely and quickly by involving all stakeholders is worrisome and troublesome. Historically, Ethiopia succeeded in defending its territories, independence and sovereignty because of the unity of its diverse population. It is the unity and solidarity of its people that withstood the test of time by repelling invasion and aggression, including Egypt’s. Assault of this vital factor makes Ethiopia most vulnerable. The sooner the problem is resolved; the better.

African (the African Union) and the UN system as well as the US tell us that Ethiopia possesses one of the strongest military establishments in the entire continent. So did the socialist Dictatorship. Today, its Defense Forces consist of more than 250,000 personnel. The regime it replaced deployed more than half a million soldiers. The UN/AU, the US and others argue that the TPLF government has expanded Ethiopia’s military hardware manufacturing capacity. They rarely acknowledge that the process to make Ethiopia self-sufficient in basic armament hardware was actually initiated under the Military Socialist Dictatorship it overthrew in 1991. They do not tell us or admit that the TPLF dismantled the Ethiopian diverse, competent and National Defense establishment at a huge cost to the country. *It* replaced it with a TPLF command.

The current security and defense establishment is staffed and managed by Tigreans at the top of the decision-making pyramid. How can Ethiopia guarantee its security and sovereignty with this non-representative command? It is true that the country’s growing, well-financed and secretive military industry establishment manufactures sophisticated armaments including T-72 tanks, missiles, rocket launchers and other sophisticated armaments. The TPLF intelligence and security system is equally hugely endowed with financial resources and works closely with African and Western partners. Its commitment to national defense is at best questionable. On the other side of the equation is a nationalist and patriotic Egyptian army with popular support to sustain a war. Western governments, the UN and AU argue that Ethiopia has not suffered from atrocities on civilians by terrorist such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Shahab. However, this capacity

tells us only a partial story. The one party state and government is far more adept at deploying its security and defense forces to kill, maim, arrest and forcibly evict ordinary Ethiopians than at repelling external threats. Lack of diversity at the top makes this establishment highly suspect, untrusted and vulnerable.

If we subscribe to the notion that economic growth that is not fair and inclusive is not sustainable or fair; it is equally plausible to suggest that Ethiopia's current military establishment that is dominated by the TPLF is either invincible or sustainable. It isn't.

When did Ethiopia Determine to Be Self-sufficient in Armaments?

A resilient economy will make Ethiopia self-sufficient in many areas including defense. To reiterate, the contention that the TPLF pioneered Ethiopia's military modernization is equally questionable. It undermines the value added from a diverse and unified representation and creativity at the command structure. I wish to remind readers the remarkable history, evolution and modernization of Ethiopia's defense forces and the pioneering leaders behind this. No one knows this better than Dr. Richard Pankhurst. In his work, *Innovation and Opposition to Change in Ethiopian History* he provides us with the following perspective. "Ethiopia's first great innovating monarch was, it is generally agreed, Emperor Tewodros, or Theodore II (1855-1868). The British writer Clements Markham referred to him as no less than the "most remarkable man" of nineteenth century Africa. Likening him to Peter the Great of Russia, he added: "They were both born kings of men, both endowed with military genius, both lovers of the mechanical arts; both possessed of dauntless courage."

Why is Emperor Tewodros "remarkable" and in what specific areas? First and foremost is his determination to unify Ethiopia and to retake lands occupied by foreign forces such as the Turks. Second is his recognition that Ethiopia cannot sustain itself without a modern and well-equipped army. Third is his determination that Ethiopia should do all these and more while maintaining its unique culture and identity. Today, these principles have been decimated by the TPLF at a cost to the country's future. In my assessment dismantling Ethiopia's national defense, institutionalizing and celebrating narrow and rent-seeking ethnic-nationalism in the defense establishment and elsewhere is corrosive to the whole and dangerous to Ethiopia's security and national interests. An ethnic security and defense establishment that caters to its ethnic creators cannot be national or patriotic.

"Tewodros' innovating genius, though remarkable for its intensity and determination, was nonetheless largely restricted, like the modernizing interests of previous rulers, to the strategic and military field. His innovations were thus mainly in such matters as the reorganization of the army, the casting of cannon, the construction of carriages upon which to transport these weapons, the building of roads for such wheeled artillery and so forth." The building of roads entails a recognition that physical infrastructure is fundamental for modernization. Cannons alone won't create resiliency and sustainability. What is remarkable is that this Ethiopian leader recognized the need of overhauling an entire materially backward society against formidable

odds void of modern educational and other institutions. Ethiopia was surrounded by enemies, the Turks in the East, the Egyptians in the West and North and competing feudal lords within.

Despite hurdle, Emperor Tewodros II's determination to establish a modern Ethiopian army and the material and physical infrastructure to support it was unmatched. "Almost the first evidence of Tewodros' innovating interest is be found in a report for July 25, 1853, by the British Consul, Walter Plowden. It states that Tewodros (still at that time known as Kasa) had, "with the assistance of some Turks, in a degree disciplined his army. In a subsequent report of July 9 of the following year Plowden stated that Kasa had "taught his soldiers some discipline." Establishing a "disciplined army" is not sufficient in sustaining it. Traditionally, soldiers obtained their sustenance by "looting" food from the population.

Emperor Tewodros II was the first to recognize soldiers needed to be paid; and required them to purchase what they need. Pankhurst quotes Plowden that the Emperor "has effected a great reform, by paying them, and ordering them to purchase their food, but in no way to harass and plunder the peasant as before." Contrast this principle with the TPLF preoccupation that it's Security and Defense establishment had license to harass, kill, maim, persecute and dispossess innocent and peaceful citizens who seek justice. How do explain that the TPLF core in Tigray is licensed and free to send special forces to intimidate, arrest, maim, kill and persecute innocent people in Gondar?

What is a Security and Defense Establishment for?

What I find relevant to underscore is the ultimate purpose of a national army. Emperor Tewodros II was unequivocal that the army's primary and sole loyalty is to Ethiopia and all of the Ethiopian people. It is not to a party, an ethnic or religious group or dictator. He created ranks such as generals in "place of feudal chieftains" or lords wedded to their localities. In Plowden's own words the Emperor "began the arduous task of breaking the power of the great feudal chiefs – a task achieved in Europe only during the reigns of many consecutive Kings." This **discipline and loyalty to country over tribe** was followed by successive regimes until the TPLF took power 138 years later. It is hard for most of us to believe that the disciplined Emperor was also a teacher and a trainer of protocol and discipline himself. He was against corruption and self-promotion. This national model has evaporated. In its place is a TPLF Security and Defense Establishment that has alienated itself from the vast majority of the population. Time and time again, it has catered to and continues to cater to the TPLF.

This takes me to the primary narrative of manufacturing of arms pioneered by Emperor Tewodros at a village called Gaffat near the town of Debre Tabor in Gondar. This is where the first Cannon making project in Ethiopian history was launched. According to Pankhurst, "Tewodros' attempts at manufacturing cannon were even more remarkable. Debtera Zaneb, one of the two main Ethiopian chroniclers of the reign, tells the story that as early as 1853 Theodore tried to make a cannon by boring a tree trunk and reinforcing it with iron. Though the result was, as might be expected, a failure, the attempt was by no means insignificant,

particularly in view of later events.” The Emperor did not stop his commitment to innovation. Several guns were produced by local craftsmen with guidance from foreign experts. The ultimate product was Sebastopol.

In Pankhurst’s own words, “The largest of the guns produced at Tewodros’ command was called “Sebastopol”, after the then recent great battle in the Crimean War. The weapon was capable of firing a 1,000 pound shell. “Sebastopol” was said to weigh at least 70 tons, and, according to the British envoy Rassam, required as many as 500 people to pull it uphill. “It was unquestionably a wonderful piece of ordnance for its size and more wonderful still was the workmanship of his Majesty’s European artisans, who had no experience of casting cannon.” History notes that the creation of this powerful cannon was the happiest in the life of this modernizing Emperor. Did everyone approve what he did? Of course not. Foreigners were threatened by the notion **that a black African country** would become the next Germany or Russia. Locals were concerned that the Emperor was wasting resources on something on which they were unfamiliar. Chieftains or lords were perturbed that their regional powers will be diminished.

To reiterate the point, successive regimes have been guided by this fundamental principle of a institutionalizing a self-reliant **National and Patriotic Defense Force** representing the country’s mosaic of peoples that is totally loyal to Ethiopia and not to a single tribe or party. Equally impressive and remarkable to internalize and remember is the dedication of members of Ethiopia’s Defense Forces against foreign aggression. Had the TPLF retained Ethiopia’s seasoned national defense, it would have been unimaginable for the Sudanese or for a group of gangsters and for others to violate Ethiopia’s national boundaries and get away with impunity. It would have been unthinkable for the Sudanese to claim Ethiopian territories and assume ownership.

Vulnerability

Political and social volatility entails enormous risks for Ethiopia. Recent events of penetration of Ethiopia’s territory in Gambella, the massacre of civilians, the capture and abduction of innocent children and herds of cattle in broad day light followed by North Sudanese aggression against civilians in Beni-Shangul Gumuz close to the mighty Abbay River and the construction of the GERD beg the question of “Who is in charge of Ethiopia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty and the safety of its citizens?” The Ethiopian poor support a massive intelligence, security and military establishment for the sole purpose of defending their country from foreign aggression and for ensuring their own safety regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation or the location of where they reside. Ironically, this force that often serves as a hired hand in the UN system does not hesitate for a minute in squashing peaceful protests. So, why the benign neglect of the country’s borders and the safety of the Ethiopian people?

I do not believe that this intelligence, security and defense establishment paid for by 101 million Ethiopians can claim legitimacy as long as its strategic objective is: a) to defend and

protect the vast natural resources, financial and economic empire of the TPLF b) to quell internal dissent and c) to prolong TPLF hegemony.

What makes a state and government legitimate?

Military might and a network of spies alone do not make a country safe and secure. North Korea has a highly developed and sophisticated military establishment. However, it is unable to produce enough goods, including foods to meet domestic demand. This raises the question of what makes a government good, acceptable to its people and therefore legitimate. The most widely accepted definition of a legitimate government is one that gets into office as a result of a fair, transparent and free electoral process. It is this fundamental principle in which ballots and votes by each eligible voter and not intimidation, bullying and bullets that gives any party or government a presumptive claim to legitimacy. In contrast, dictatorial and authoritarian governments do not allow separation of powers---**legislative, judiciary and executive**. Because these institutions are considered to be tools in the pursuit of power and riches, they are merged into one to the point of no distinction. The TPLF seized political power by force of arms and not public consent. Accordingly, it is determined to maintain this power indefinitely without a vote of any kind. It uses the security and **defense forces to maintain continuity rather the defense of the country from external aggression. This makes the current government not only illegitimate; but also unreliable. For this reason, no one except a determined and unified popular force** can hold this merged government and state accountable for aggression from without and human suffering from within. It operates with absolute impunity regardless of atrocities inflicted on the population.

Courage resides in the collective will of the people

Who would have imagined just a few months ago that the people of Gondar would bring the TPLF regime to its knees? Who would have imagined that the old, the young, the rich, the poor, farmers, children as young as 5 years, Muslims and Christians, teachers, students etc. would unite, defy orders from the TPLF, join hands and demand democratic change? In my view, Gondaries shattered the mistaken narrative and view that popular resistance does not work. This history making event shows that popular resistance does work. No force can suppress the will and determination of people who stand for a common purpose. This remarkable resistance needs to be scaled up so that it becomes national.

Among the most remarkable attributes of the popular uprising in Gondar is its civility, discipline and peace orientation. The protestors made a clear distinction between the repressive and arrogant TPLF and the people of Tigray. These two peoples have a great deal in common and they share a common destiny. The call by the TPLF core in Tigray for war and revenge is insane and must be condemned by Tigreans who do not share this call. Gondaries never targeted the people of Tigray and will never do so. The Tigray Killil administration's irresponsible call for revenge against the Amhara population of Gondar reinforces my contention that the only beneficiaries will be Ethiopia's traditional enemies. I am concerned that killings of more Amhara

by the TPLF will lead to civil war. No sane person should want civil war over peace and national reconciliation. No single Gondarie or other person that I know of has called for revenge or for civil war or for the destruction of property etc. It is unbelievable to me that the TPLF core prefers the protection of buildings and other property over the sanctity of life. The persistence of this shameful preoccupation of material property over the sanctity of life will mark a dark that will impact numerous generations to come in the relations between the Tigrean and Amhara peoples. Each Ethiopian needs to work hard to avert such a disaster.

Legitimacy is gone

Legitimacy is often times in the eye of the beholder. Those in power and those who benefit from misery have a different definition and understanding in contrast to those who suffer from illegitimacy. Remember that, once upon a time slavery was accepted as legitimate except by those who were enslaved and tormented by their owners. Society woke up and said that slavery is not legitimate. This dehumanizing phenomenon was criminalized by the state and the government responsible for implementing the new law barring slavery. Might does not necessarily equate with public safety or national security.

So, why is Ethiopia, a country where 20 million people are starving, tens of thousands political opponents and dissidents are in jail and legions of youth are leaving their homes in search of opportunities abroad given legitimacy by the UN family, Western nations, rising powers in the East and investors? The simple and honest answer is that their interests are well served by a government that an overwhelming number of Ethiopians consider illegitimate. These same powers also contend that Ethiopia is one of the few countries in Africa and the Middle East that is relatively stable. In a notable commentary by Anna Newby April 29, 2016 entitled “Ethiopia’s outsized importance to African security,” the author asks a pertinent question that I have tried to un-fathom and answer over the past decade. “Is Ethiopia a rising star in Africa? By some measures, yes.

As the second most-populous country on the continent (after Nigeria), it has achieved GDP growth rates above 10 percent for a decade. It is home to the African Union headquarters and a key U.S. ally in the fight against al-Shabab militants in Somalia and in counterterrorism efforts more broadly. In a region where sectarian and ethnic tensions have a tendency to flare up, Ethiopia has achieved remarkable social cohesion. All this, after suffering decades of conflict, drought, famine, and poverty, among other challenges.” This is untrue. I do not remember a time when there has been peace over the past 40 years. The country has been in a state of permanent suspense since the 2005 elections.

We may debate the rate of growth; but there is growth. I disagree with the contention of internal stability; but, I would have to acknowledge the reality that Ethiopia has contained al-Shahab and other terrorist cells within its soil. Where I agree with the author is the following. “At the same time, the government—led by the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition since 1991—has been criticized for cracking down on free speech, the

press, and critics. And while Ethiopia is unlikely to re-experience famine, an ongoing drought in the country remains a major concern.” I disagree with the author on this point. There has not been a single year over the past 25 years in which millions of Ethiopian did not depend on foreign food aid. Currently, 20 million Ethiopians are suffering from the worst drought induced famine in more than 50 years. The Ethiopian government has urged the global community to provide humanitarian aid. Numerous humanitarian agencies are scrambling for donations. The Ethiopian Diaspora has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in support of the most vulnerable. Ethiopia is conflict-ridden. It is hunger-ridden.

The author said nothing about interethnic conflicts in Gambella, Gondar and Oromia or abductions in Gambella and Sudanese violations of Ethiopian territories in Beni-Shangul Gumuz. Despite substantial and substantive omissions, Ethiopia continues to generate a great deal of interest among think-tanks and academics; albeit with limited participation by experts of people of Ethiopian decent. At least, Brookings has done better than most where no single Ethiopian is invited to contribute to a discussion that affect Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people.

Anna Newby noted that the Africa Security Initiative hosted a major forum at Brookings Institution early this year. “Brookings Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence Michael O’Hanlon opened the conversation by commenting that while we don’t always hear a lot about Ethiopia in the West—often drowned out by troubling developments in Somalia, Nigeria, and the Great Lakes region—it is “one of the most important countries on the continent by almost any measure.” Newby says that “As Africa’s oldest independent country, it has a unique history—and along with it, a unique set of assets and challenges.” The focus of the discussion was the “security situation in Ethiopia and how it related to the broader region “addressed by Terrence Lyons, Professor at George Mason University and a leading scholar on Ethiopia. In his assessment of “Cohesion and tension” he acknowledged that Ethiopia is a “tough story” domestically—with a powerful single party that won 100 percent of seats in Parliament in the last election, the Ethiopian government has its share of authoritarian tendencies.”

Similar to other Western experts who accept government and donor data at face value, he acknowledged that “the economy has grown at an incredible pace for the last decade.” There no indication that lag of meaningful improvements in human development for the vast majority of the population, outrageous income and wealth concentration by a few ethnic elites at the top and an alarming inequality that deepens poverty even further, rent-seeking and scandalous outflow of financial capital from one of the poorest countries on the planet were considered priorities at this forum. As has become the norm, stability took center stage over the issues of justice, genuine equality, the rule of law and democracy. This is the American narrative we hear all the time. Ethiopians have taken matters into their own hands and are shattering this false narrative.

I was taken aback by the contention presented by one scholar that ethnic-federalism “has worked well.” Why would people in Oromia, Gambella, the Ogaden and Gondar risk their lives if

this system worked so well? Newby quotes Professor Abye Assefa, associate professor at St. Lawrence University, who highlighted Ethiopia's ethnic and religious diversity: The largest ethnic group in the country, Oromo people, comprise about 35 percent of the population, with the rest divided among a variety of ethnic groups; and Ethiopians are roughly two-thirds Christian and one-third Muslim" and that the system is working. For sure, Ethiopian society is one of the most diverse in the world and the Ethiopian people are the least tribal anywhere in the world. This is the reason why the country survived over thousands of years. Abye is generally right in asserting the notion of "a strong sense of an Ethiopian identity—a product of its rich civilizational history. The central government has implemented a system of ethnic federalism that has worked well." My counter point is that the system of ethnic elite based federalism has failed as has the pretense of democracy. The model has in fact strengthened ethnic elite democracy and riches at the expense of genuine democracy that thrives when its foundation is individual freedom and socioeconomic cohesion and solidarity. The pitfalls of ethnicization of politics in Ethiopia was not discussed. The growth story is exaggerated. A simple question to ask is "Who has benefitted most from growth?" It is ethnic elites, most notably Tigreans with strong ties to the TPLF. This was not acknowledged at the forum.

Further, the ethnic federal model devolved power to ethnic regions. However, the TPLF wields central policy and decision-making authority. Unlike the previous model of a national army representing all ethnic groups that is loyal to the country, the current federal defense force is staffed and managed by the TPLF and is loyal only the TPLF. The TPLF machine permeates all societal life thereby smothering fundamental rights and freedoms. Tensions and popular eruptions illustrate the notion that a firm national consensus and institutional arrangement on the meaning of democracy for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society and on the respective and complementary roles of the federal and regional governments has yet to be discussed openly. The Constitution itself must be scrutinized. Some Ethiopian commentators contend that Ethiopia's national unity and sovereignty have been severely diminished by the current ethnic state and government; and that further devolution of power without guaranteeing the rights of non-ethnic citizens would further strengthens secession (Article 39). There is a plethora of evidence that land and other natural resources ownership have become major sources of conflict. State ownership of land on behalf of the entire Ethiopian people has changed dramatically and irreversibly. This is in part because it is the TPLF that effectively owns land and profits from it. It is also local ethnic elites who claim rightful ownership of land and allow ethnic cleansing in the localities. This tension between the center (federal) and regions (kilil) is conflict-prone. It makes the country vulnerable too.

Commoditization of lands

Land is the single most important source of political power and riches in Ethiopia today. It has become a source of rivalry and conflict. How has the TPLF commoditized and politicized lands? It is through opaque long-term leases and sales to foreign and favored domestic investors. Land became the single most important and globally marketed commodity as a consequence of the

great land grab in Africa of which Ethiopia has become a magnet. Land grab and annexation and regional expansion (e.g. Tigray incorporating Amhara lands) has resulted in the alienation and dispossession of millions of Ethiopians from their singular possession and their identity. This led to the current revolt that is unlikely to stop. As usual, the TPLF will try to crush the rebellion and kill activists. Whether it kill or not, the problem won't go away; and the determination of people will grow stronger. Evidence shows that marginalization and alienation is now a major "source of some social, economic, and political tensions" in Gambella, Oromia and Gondar.

Professor Assefa's claim is absolutely absurd and unreal. "On democracy and governance issues," he claims, "that while the government has its shortcomings (including the lack of an independent judiciary, among others), Ethiopian media and civil society aren't always engaged in constructive dialogue themselves (it can be "open warfare," there is a media and civil society". Is he denying that the media or civil society that serves as a tool of the ruling party does not advance democracy? Both party institutions advocate the status quo while containing and suffocating dissent. There is no evidence whatsoever that civil society and media are independent or free. They operate as long as they do not question the legitimacy of the TPLF state and government. For this reason, the omission in the presentation is disconcerting. Ethiopia is one of the two worst jailers of journalists in Africa and among the top ten in the world. More journalists have left Ethiopia than any other country in Africa. Despite repeated global outcry for their release, famous journalists such as Eskinder Nega are still languishing in jail. Many are tortured. At least 5,000 Oromo are in jail. Dozens have been killed as I write this article. Numerous dissidents have been sentenced under the draconian Anti-Terrorism law. In the absence of a free media and civil society, no group can provide the public credible information let alone constructive alternatives.

Equally tragic is the political culture of **TPLF ethnic hegemony**. It is true that the country's political culture has always been adversarial or "my way or the highway." But, this mentality has been reinforced by the TPLF. It penetrates well-functioning parties, dismantles them and forces them to be adjuncts. It has allowed more than 80 ethnic parties with no additional value to the democratization process. I therefore agree with Professor Lyons that "Ethiopia will be **brittle** as long as it restricts free expression—a more vibrant society will strengthen Ethiopia as it continues to face new stresses." I also welcome his assessment of the gravity and "severity of Ethiopia's drought, with about 10 million people currently in need of food assistance. That said, the government has moved efficiently to respond to citizens' needs to date."

Sadly, no one dared to challenge the root causes for the recurrent drought related famine, hunger and impoverishment. Is it really climate change or oppressive and repressive governance? Why has massive foreign aid not helped to change the structure of Ethiopia's agriculture? Is food aid the panacea? A provocative piece "Can aid reform end Ethiopia's repeated hunger emergencies?" by Katy Migiro of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, May 5, 2016 illustrates Ethiopia's growth dilemma this way. "Over the years, Ethiopian mother-of-three Hana Mekonnen has received all sorts of aid designed to free her from the bitter trap of

poverty and hunger: goats, cash transfers, resettlement and, of course, sacks of grain. None has worked." Her son is malnourished. Food rations do not transform structure and create resiliency among the poor. "No one in this village has anything to give their children. We all live on food aid." Is God to blame? Not at all. If this was the case, Indians and Chinese and hundreds of millions of people across the globe would be blaming one another and blaming their creator for their misery. India, China, Tanzania and others are able to cope with drought by improving land ownership, improving farming methods, providing substantial inputs in the form of better seeds, fertilizers, loans and credits and offering alternative sources of income. Ethiopia's recurring famine and hunger is therefore a matter of misplaced and misguided policy and disempowerment of farmers rather than nature. The TPLF seems happy that poverty, hunger and disease afflict millions. Its perception is that it is easier to rule poor people. This is not so, as the people of Gondar are showing heroically. Justice does not make a distinction on the basis of income or age or religion. It is indivisible. Poor people have courage because they want to be free from a system that keeps them poor.

Perpetual dependency

Following the 2005 elections that the ruling party annulled by force, the World Bank came up with a new formula to keep the poor alive. Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), "set up in 2005, helps Hanna through the 'lean season' between harvests, while also rehabilitating land and building roads, health posts and schools to tackle some of the underlying causes of poverty. The scheme, administered by the government and largely funded by international donors, was set up to end the annual scramble for emergency funding to feed hungry Ethiopians, averaging 5 million a year in the decade before its launch." Eleven years later, this program has made little impact in changing the structure of Ethiopia's rural and Biblical economy. **PSNP "has not ended hunger"** but has enriched the TPLF. Some experts contend that it has deepened dependency and reliance on food aid. Others contend that Ethiopia is doing better than before, famine has been averted and that the government is responding more effectively than previous governments. Is this enough? The author quotes a British expert who opines that "There's still this level of vulnerability and poverty that is persistent and that's harder to turn a corner on." Is this not the heart of the issue? If Ethiopia has been growing by double digits for several years, how does one explain that it is unable to feed itself?

The imperative of policy and structural change

The facts speak. "This year, one in five Ethiopians need food aid, with 8 million receiving support from the PSNP and another 10.2 million from a \$1.4 billion humanitarian appeal. By 2020, the project - Africa's largest social safety net - will have cost donors \$5.7 billion, raising questions about its sustainability. "Ultimately, there does need to be a vision for this not being a donor-financed safety net," says Greg Collins, director of the Center for Resilience at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). We more and more need to be investing in

creating opportunities that allow those who are able to graduate from the PSNP." This won't happen under the TPLF. For some odd reason the TPLF does not see shame in dependency.

Resiliency is a function of **people centered and anchored development**. So is national security. Investing in and boosting the natural abilities, capabilities and productive capacities of the poor requires freedom and ownership rights, voice and participation in policy and decision-making. The growing "acceptance that some Ethiopians will be dependent on aid indefinitely" excuses the TPLF government and the donor community. In my assessment they have essentially failed in addressing the core problem of suffocating and repressive governance and its impact on sustainability. Among other things it restrains productivity by politicizing inputs.

The narrative of a growing and expanding economy tells us an incomplete and a distorted story. The fact remains that close to 20 percent of Ethiopians are food aid dependent. I have consistently argued that for Ethiopia to escape the vicious cycle of drought induced and other forms of hunger citizens must enjoy political freedom. There must be an accelerated structural changes and a bold, deliberate and planned urbanization and manufacturing and industrialization policy owned by Ethiopians—textiles, shoes and other leather products, processed foods. These would offer alternative employment to millions of rural people; generate millions of employment opportunities specifically for the country's youth; and encourage participation by the domestic private sector. This requires political will and the breaking up of TPLF clientele and endowment monopolies.

Ethiopia needs both political land reform. There is no social or economic rationale of leasing and or selling lands to foreign investors and favored domestic entrepreneurs while smallholders are forced to survive on half an acre of land per family. Forget the GERD. It won't feed Ethiopians. Ethiopia has yet to develop irrigated agriculture. Further, productivity on small plots of land has been hampered by lag in technological inputs and non-politicized capacity building throughout the country. I therefore agree with Michael Mosselmans of Christian Aid that "What's needed is more investment in action before droughts strike" rather than scrambling for food aid on a recurrent basis. The TPLF has made Ethiopia a beggar and vulnerable nation. The economics of smart advance planning are out there; but the TPLF won't touch it. The UN and OXFAM and others have been advising the Ethiopian government that "Every dollar spent on preparedness saves seven dollars in disaster aftermath." But it takes a caring government and leadership to avert disaster by making hard choice. I find no evidence that the TPLF cares if millions starve to death.

Here, I tend to agree with Ato Mitiku of the Ethiopian Disaster Mitigation Office that "efforts to end hunger for women like Hana must be driven by Ethiopia itself." This is possible to the extent that the political and social climate becomes conducive to joint efforts in all segments of life. Participation by Ethiopians means freedom; and freedom is not going to be granted by the TPLF. Only Ethiopians united can achieve freedom. It is sheer fantasy for the government to claim that Ethiopia will achieve "middle income status by 2025." Even if I were to entertain this possibility, it will take immediate and radical political reform that will lead to genuine

democratization to achieve this dream. The hemorrhaging of Ethiopian society from ethnic-elite capture, scandalous rent-seeking, narrow ethnic-favoritism as well as massive leakage of billions of dollars out of the country won't stop unless there is a change in government.

In summary. Ethiopia is an irreplaceable country on its own right. Its durability and prosperity depend in large part on the unfettered equality and unity of its diverse population and on their proper representation in the political process and in policy and decision-making, including in national intelligence, security, defense and foreign relations. It is such national unity that guarantees deterrence of any form of foreign aggression. An intelligence service and defense that caters exclusively to TPLF hegemony is unlikely to be a match to potential Egyptian or other aggression.