

## **Ethiopia Faces Imminent Danger**

**&**

### **The rest of us who love the country have failed**

**Aklog Birara (Dr.)**

My contention in this paper is simple and straightforward. Despite the challenges Ethiopia faces, we have failed to unite on the fundamental principles of Ethiopia as an independent, free and sovereign country; and expressing the notion that we are Ethiopians first. My other identities as an Ethiopian from Gondar, an Amhara by virtue of ethnic affinity imposed on me by the TPLF/EPRDF constitution, an Orthodox Christian by faith, a political economist by profession, a human rights activist and writer by vocation etc. are all a given. No one can deny me these identities and rights regardless of his or her power. The identity that has defined all my life is being accepted as an individual from a proud and independent country called Ethiopia. It is this country that I do not wish to lose.

Sadly, the ethnic and linguistic federal constitution imposed by the TPLF, EPLF, OLF and others on the Ethiopian people undermined both the country as a durable entity and the honor of calling oneself Ethiopian instead of Amhara, Tigre, Gurage, Oromo etc. Tragically and consequentially, Article 39 offered ethnic elites a way out of the larger tent of Ethiopia if and when they choose. This is where we are today. Ethiopia faces the greatest danger in its history. This is because of the weaknesses, partisanship, hidden agendas, egos and fragmentation of pro-Ethiopian political, civic, religious, professional, academic and other circles; and because of narrow ethnic elites who assumed power and acquired wealth undeservedly.

The pendulum has swung in favor of ethnic elite based political and social groups; and against those who hold strong affinity to Ethiopia as a historical and geopolitical entity. I do not wish to dwell why the later failed to meet the country's urgent needs beyond the paper mill of churning ideas. I admit that I admire the systematic organization and leadership of political parties and groups whose visions, roadmaps and alternative political programs for their own nations, nationalities and people's drive their day-to-day operations. Illustrative of this transformative development is the popular struggle of the Oromo people. They possess the most integrated, most proactive and results-oriented lobbying and diplomatic talent pool of any Ethiopian. Their civic organization is highly integrated and mimics TPLF's REST.

Count the number of groups with the Ethiopian label and ask yourself if there is any coherence and collaboration among them? Ask yourself how many political parties with the Ethiopian label exist everywhere on this planet and query them why they do not unite and offer Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people a more compelling and better roadmap and political alternative than the regime they oppose?

### **An emerging transformative generation**

Ethiopia's greatest hope resides in the young generation of Ethiopians who are sacrificing their lives to advance freedom, justice, genuine equality, representative democracy; and a commitment to preserve Ethiopia as a country. Their grassroots based, indigenous and creative struggle has no parallel in our country's history. The regime's response has been cruel and unforgiving. Nevertheless, the state of siege of the TPLF/EPRDF state and government, the killings, maiming, wounding, tortures of hundreds and the "enforced disappearances" and incarcerations of thousands have not deterred them from continuing the popular resistance. Their determination, willingness to sacrifice their lives for a better tomorrow, their ability to conquer fear, ethnic bigotry and division; and to embrace collaboration and humanity across ethnic lines is the most gratifying development that I have seen since the Yekatit revolution! It is this internally generated and led resistance that has stunned and frightened the TPLF/EPRDF regime.

Why so? Because it is people anchored and led. Large numbers of EPRDF members either identify with the resistance or have jointed it. The resistance is indigenous and creative. It adopts and adjusts in response to needs. It draws on a cross section of the population. Unlike the past, the rural population including farmers, are involved in the struggle. Spiritual leaders of all faiths are involved giving the resistance moral grounding and legitimacy. It is largely self-reliant.

### **The wrong response**

Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn's declaration of a State of Emergency on Sunday, October 9, 2016 did not come as a surprise to me. An undeclared state of emergency of sorts was imposed on the Oromia region a few months ago. This was followed by an identical measure in the entire Amhara region.

Let us first agree on terminology and narratives concerning the resistance. I find it disingenuous and rather divisive on the part of some commentators when they call the resistance in the Amhara region as one confined to Gondar, Debre Tabor, Bahir Dar, Debre Marcos etc. The resistance is hardly local. The narrative is Amhara wide and national, that is, Ethiopian. Therefore, why not narrate it the same way as the resistance in Oromia is narrated. Accept it for what it is; it is an Amhara resistance that is similar to the resistance in Oromia. I won't dwell on the differences in terms of strategic direction. Census matters. Remember the numbers. Not only do the vast majority of Amhara live in Gondar, Wollo and Gojjam; but it is also here where Amhara resistance is intense, profoundly creative and grassroots based and led. It is here where hundreds of Amhara youth were summarily executed in broad daylight, others wounded and maimed; and still other thousands evicted from their homes and "enforced to disappear" to unknown destinations. It is here where the TPLF/EPRDF is disarming the population.

A few weeks before the recent intense popular resistance, Debretsion Gebremikael, Minister of Communication and Information Technology and Deputy Prime Minister had opined that the

“TPLF possessed one of the strongest security and defense establishments with the capability not only to crush 30 million Amhara but also” to exercise similar ventures in Africa. Following this threat, the TPLF deployed Agazi, sharpshooters, helicopter guns ships, special armored vehicles with machine guns to critical towns in the Amhara region. It gunned down hundreds the same way it did in Oromia. It used the special order from Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn to reign “terror” on innocent people. It imposed military administration the same way it had done in Oromia a few months earlier.

So, the current State of Emergency is the continuation, deepening and broadening (nationwide) of an already established state and government assault on dissent. I have no doubt this state of emergency is intended to crush dissent and any form of opposition; to arrest and jail prominent leaders. This is already happening. The arrest of Engineer Yilkal Getinet, leader of the Blue or Semayawi Party is illustrative. Sources inform me that other members of this and other parties are being “hunted” and arrested. No doubt they will be accused of different crimes!

Other immediate targets would include disarming the Amhara population first, followed by a similar and intense exercise in Oromia and other parts of the country. The regime knows well that it is incapable and unwilling to address the root causes of the popular resistance. As expected, it continues to resort to repressive and violent means to crush the resistance. Simply put, the state of emergency **is a license** to take any measure against any opponent and to try to crush the popular resistance by providing a rationale that the global community would buy. For example, investors and governments such as the United States that place a huge premium on stability and the containment of terrorism at an enormous cost to civil liberties and human life are among the clients. The license to take any measure goes beyond arrests and tortures. It includes extrajudicial killings, maiming and other types of inhumane treatment. Brace yourselves for an unimaginable human tragedy.

Would this solve the crisis? Not at all. In fact it will worsen it; and Ethiopia’s foreign enemies would have a field day. On the positive side, those within the country who face immediate danger from the state of emergency will no doubt be more determined than ever to bring down the cruel and callous regime. Someone told me today that the regime will produce more heroes and heroines. It will solidify the opposition. It will force those of us outside to unite and put more pressure and offer alternative sooner than later.

### **What is a state of emergency anyway?**

Wikipedia defines a state of emergency as follows. “A government or division of government may declare that this or that area or the entire country is in a state of emergency. This means that the **government can suspend** and/or change some functions of the executive, the legislative and/or the judiciary during this period of time. It alerts citizens to change their normal behavior and orders government agencies to implement emergency plans. A government can declare a state of emergency during a time of natural or human-made disaster, during a period of civil unrest, or following a declaration of war or situation of

international/internal armed conflict.” In the case of Ethiopia, the state of emergency refers to “civil unrest and armed conflict.” The measure will be used as a legal foundation to suspend the rights and freedoms of individuals or groups.

A Washington Post’s October 11, 2016 piece, “Ethiopia imposes state of emergency amid unrest” captures the essence and rationale behind this draconian action. “The Ethiopian government painted a grim picture of **a country under siege** by foreign-backed gangs as it justified its newly announced six-month state of emergency Monday.” Getachew Reda well-known for make-believe stories explained the measure as follows:

1. The violence is “the work of foreign-funded groups,” meaning such countries as Egypt and Eritrea and Ethiopian activists in the Diaspora. Imagine telling poor young people in the Amhara or Oromia region that they are motivated and supported by foreign agencies or agents. It is absurd and untrue. No amount of money would lead youth to die. The motivating factor is state and government instigated repression. This is why the resistance won’t stop.
2. “You have motorbike gangs carrying petrol bombs, carrying firearms in groups of 10 going from place to place, terrorizing the public.” Research and video clips show that the protestors are a cross-section of ordinary people appalled by their dire conditions and resentful of the regime that suppressed them. Can Reda attribute boycotts, sit-in and other forms of peaceful resistance to foreign financing and to “gangsters?” Can he provide concrete evidence that shows that foreign governments and groups are involved directly? Can he explain the root causes of the revolt rather than justifying the unjustifiable?
3. As indicated earlier, the state of emergency strengthens the TPLF. Why? Because the security and military establishments are dominated, controlled and commanded by TPLF generals and other high ranking officers. The victims of the campaign will be Amhara and Oromo dissenters, activists and political leaders. As the Post article shows, “Ethiopian military (TPLF) will take over security across the country.” This is the reason why I suggest that the measure is a license to arrest, torture and kill. The regime would have all the options it needs to do what it wishes to do under the cover of a Proclamation. This will operate the same way or worse as the draconian anti-Terrorism Proclamation.
4. Remember that it is the TPLF security, federal police and defense, especially the notorious Agazi that inflicted pain and agony by killing hundreds in response to anti-government protests. So, the Prime Minister’s rationale that the emergency measure is justified because it is intended to “protect citizens” is untrue. A regime that kills its own citizens when and if they protest cannot turn around and argue that the emergency is for their own benefit. The benefit resides somewhere else.

5. The TPLF/EPRDF places enormous and singular premium on property owned by the TPLF and its cohort of ethnic elites and foreign investors. Human life is secondary. The governing elite has a stake in these investments. There is direct correlation between graft, corruption and illicit outflow of funds and trade, remittances, foreign aid and investments. There is ample evidence to show that ordinary people, especially youth have not benefitted from these investments or from the country's growth.
6. "The kind of threats we are facing targeting infrastructure, targeting civilians, cannot be handled through ordinary law enforcement procedures" says Reda to the Post. He justifies the unjustifiable this way. What does anyone expect from a representative of a crushing regime that does not imagine the implications of the measure on the country and its people? The same security, federal police and defense forces directly involved in the deaths of hundreds are now in charge of killing more. In Gondar, Agazi killed a mother accusing her of feeding the hungry. Imagine that and think what the license to kill will do to innocent people!
7. The regime is incapable and unwilling to address grievances peacefully. It reverts to emergency measures as a solution to systemic problems. While I do not condone targeting economic and physical infrastructure---the costs of these investments are huge for the society-- I understand the reasons behind them. The regime failed to conduct serious dialogue and consultation with its own citizens and with the opposition, virtually closing the door for peaceful options.
8. While I do not condone targeting individuals and property I understand that economic measures such as withholding taxes, remittances and boycotts are effective. When I think of victims of the regime, their outrage is understandable. For example, their argument that targeting economic infrastructure offers a window to weaken the system and alienate it from the population. Investors become weary of being targeted and leave. Growth stalls; FDI and government taxes decrease etc. The opportunity to steal decreases. The Post quotes Emma Gordon, Senior Analyst with Verisk Maplecroft who says. "The attacks on the economy are an effective way to pressure the government.....The scale and frequency of the attacks on foreign assets has already rocked confidence in Ethiopia...In both Amhara and Oromia, some assets have been near-totally destroyed despite having government sanctioned security on site. As a result, some investors are pulling out of the country." It is arguable that the state of emergency would mitigate the risk.
9. Property and prolonging power are the lead reasons why Ethiopia declared a state of emergency. The TPLF/EPRDF elite has argued for decades that it is transforming the national economy and tackling endemic poverty. Facts on the ground say otherwise.

Ethiopia is still one of the poorest countries on the planet. Per capita income per annum is a third of the African average. More than 18 million people depend on some form of food aid. Yet, it has numerous millionaires who made their fortunes under the current regime. People are resentful that a tiny pool of government elites and their allies live a luxury beyond belief while the vast majority cannot afford three meals a day. The emergency declaration won't solve this structural and policy problem.

10. In short, in my view the license to kill aggravates the social and political situation and endangers the country's future. This is a reality and the regime needs to deal with it through dialogue and consultation and not through sharpshooters, machine guns and helicopter gunships. Think of what happened in Syria. One of the most developed countries in the Middle East is destroyed. Rebuilding it will take several generations. The Ethiopian regime should be wary that its prescription may lead to the undoing of Ethiopia as we know it. The rest of us should do our level best to avert the next Syria in the Horn of Africa.

### **What I propose we should do**

1. First and foremost let those of us who care reject the current State of Emergency. It fails to address the root causes that led to popular resistance. The Prime Minister's contention that his government wants to ensure "the safety of citizens first" is deceptive and cunning. The TPLF/EPRDF government killed hundreds of innocent people. It cannot, therefore, argue that it will "safeguard the lives of citizens."
2. I urge all Ethiopian political, civic, professional, religious and other groups and individuals to unite in saving Ethiopia from further Balkanization by making an unreserved commitment to uphold the country as a unified, free, independent and sovereign multinational and multicultural state.
3. I urge us to advance a representative democracy based on the rights of individual citizens, majority rule and the protection of the rights of minorities under the law.
4. I urge that us to push for the formation of a state and government that ensure social and economic justice, human worth and dignity, respect for human rights, people's unique cultures, languages, history, religion and equality under the law as the foundation of future governance.
5. I urge all of us to support the grassroots resistance that is struggling to free the society from oppression, massive displacement, killings and enforced disappearances.
6. I urge each and every one of us to push for an **All-Stakeholders Conference** and provide inputs for a compelling roadmap and the formation of a Transitional Government of National Unity.
7. I urge all Ethiopian civic organizations to **form a consortium for active diplomacy**.

8. I urge each and every one of us to withhold remittances for the next 6 months.