

Dynamics of Conflict and Promises of Renaissance: Does freedom really matter for Ethiopians?

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Part V (b)

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At Doha, I was reminded of the importance of human rights and fundamental freedoms in any society to live meaningful life and fulfil potential. The virtues of both principles were hammered by several experts, some as a consequence of their own “bitter” personal experiences under dictatorial regimes, others who reaped benefits, and still others aspiring to achieve justice. There was no single individual who found virtues in dictatorial governance whether Arab, African, Asian, European or other. The consensus was that human rights and human freedom are vital in realizing human potential, worth and development. They are indivisible and have no boundaries.

Yet, most citizens in most of the 22 Arab countries of 371 million people do not enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Arab Spring that generated so much hope and expectation turned out to be a mirage. It is succeeding only in one country, Tunisia. Participants agreed that Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries as a group with a population of close to one billion people are far ahead than most of the Arab world in achieving pluralist governance and in the equitable treatment of women. The exceptions to this trend are fewer and include the second most populous country in SSA, Ethiopia with a population of 94 million people.

The consequence of dictatorial governance is that it is punishing and debilitating for citizens and dangerous for countries. Citizens have little or no recourse to contest unjust and unfair policy decisions. They have no say in protecting their personal or national interests. One major decision by authoritarian regimes--one Arab (Saudi Arabia) and one SSA (Ethiopia) - that took place in the last two months alone underscore the detrimental nature of living and coping with governance that limits and or denies the protection of human rights and the full benefits of fundamental freedoms for ordinary Ethiopians regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation and irrespective of gender, age and or level of education. The Saudis did not make any distinction among Ethiopians. They treated and still treat all Ethiopians harshly as does their own government. The Ethiopian government did not protest because it wishes to preserve good investment and trade relations with Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. The thesis of this article is that Ethiopian migrant workers will continue to suffer because their own government does defend their human rights.

The degradation of human dignity and humanity by Saudi security personnel, police and sponsored and or condoned civilian vigilantes is an assault on Ethiopian society and on each of us as Ethiopians. The gravity of physical and psychological abuse and damage and economic loss incurred by hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians is unprecedented. It has no parallel under previous Ethiopian governments. Equally unprecedented is how Ethiopians in the Diaspora, who live in an environment of freedom and respect for human rights responded to the crisis. For the first time since the 2005 Elections, thousands of Ethiopians across the globe closed ranks and rose to the occasion. They found a common cause that galvanized them across ethnic, religious, gender, age, education and class boundaries. As a consequence, they shamed the Saudis and compelled the Ethiopian government to

respond. The key point is that they did this together as Ethiopians. They raised tens of thousands of dollars and channeled the funds to their compatriots. This effort must continue unabated. There are thousands of Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia whose fate is unknown and thousands more in Yemeni transition camps.

Sad but true; those who returned and will return from Saudi Arabia suffer two ways: degradation by the Saudis; and lack of opportunities and continued denial of fundamental human rights and freedom at home. The right to work and the right to establish an enterprise etc. is a fundamental human right. It turns out that going back home is no picnic. According to the New York Times (Ethiopian Migrants Expelled by Saudis Remain in Limbo Back Home, January 8, 2014), “About 150,000 Ethiopians have been forced out of Saudi Arabia. Their expulsion puts the Ethiopian government under strain because the **remittances** they sent had greatly contributed to the country...” and it’s “fast paced growth.” Forget remittances. What happens to returnees and what happens to those who do not have meaningful jobs or no who do not have any job at all? Is this not a social crisis to which the Ethiopian government is accountable? Do donors have a moral obligation to insist on a growth model that is youth and people centered?

Why human trade? በወጣቶች ድረሰላ፤

Seen from the government angle, the single most important motivating factor for legal (178 licensed firms) and (at least 400 unlicensed or illegal operators) human capital exports are among the leading sources of quick riches for enterprises with “connections to officials” and a reliable sources of foreign exchange in the form of remittances for the government. Those enticed to work in the Middle East and North Africa pay a minimum of 2,000 birr, an average of 2,500 birr and a high of

5,000 birr per transaction. In other words, trade in human capital and what experts call human trafficking is lucrative for traders and for the government. Those who leave the country must pay upfront by borrowing or selling their assets. If a person loses in the process as occurred with evictions from Saudi Arabia, she/he joins the millions who are poor. The person is then forced to seek a way out. It is a never ending cycle.

The New York Times article cited earlier presents a poignant picture of the magnitude of the problem. Mohammad Jemal who left Ethiopia to escape debilitating poverty and to “support his family” and was forced to return to his homeland zeroed in on the problem. “I went to college and dropped out.” Failure is considered a shame for him and his family. “If he had gone back home and started a simple life with a poorly paid job (the state of affairs for thousands of college graduates), “people would have called my family names.” He had no other alternative but to pay the fees and move to Saudi Arabia or elsewhere to earn a living.

The returnees from Saudi Arabia represent the tip of the iceberg. The Times quotes a local resident in the town of Leguama, a town of 5,000 people saying that “almost all the youths” in the town “had left because of poverty and had now come back” to a world that is the same. Ethiopia is dotted by villages, towns and cities that are not unlike Mohammed’s home town. I suggested in a previous article that the exodus will not ebb as long as the root causes that drive youth remain intractable. “The desire to leave remains high.” Why? Mohammed earned “\$780 per month” twice the per capita income per annum of \$390.” He cannot even demand the right that his government embark upon a deliberate public sector investment policy that focuses on youth training, retraining and employment and that channels millions of aid monies to the effort. This is a policy alternative that the government can no longer ignore.

Ethiopia suffers from “cancerous” corruption

I do not subscribe to the notion that Ethiopia suffers from lack of capital. Billions of dollars in aid, remittances and foreign direct investment would do miracles if used properly to generate employment for youth, for example. Experts suggest that authoritarian and/or ethnic- elites do not often grasp the magnitude and implications of the oppressive and divisive governance they created on the welfare and viability of the society they rule. Ethiopia’s political system is corrupt. Rampant and crippling corruption, bribery and ethnic-based favoritism in employment and education siphon off capital from the society and reduces productivity and social welfare. It corrodes trust in government. It reduces Ethiopia’s ability to expand the middle class. Assets are concentrated in a few hands. No one is allowed to protest or to offer competing alternatives. In the words of Peter Coy, “For the brutal few, hanging on to power and wealth outweighs all else,” even if it means that the society will fall apart.” Even if it means that Ethiopian youth will be forced to leave the country in droves and suffer the consequences of being migrant workers. Coy’s point is that these elites fail to recognize the value of strong institutions, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and an enabling regulatory environment that promotes a robust and strong private sector as well as strong financial institutions that facilitate proper allocation for sustainability.

Constant reforms that better the society are anathema to authoritarian rule. Independent institutions and positive values flourish to the extent that the political system allows them. In Ethiopia, ethnic-elites do not cherish reform or favor independent institutions. They fear reform. They fear that opening up political space would threaten their grip on private wealth and political power. In a commentary on “**Why Nations Fail,**” Francis Fukuyama underscores the primacy of independent institutions for sustainability noting “Bad institutions exist because it is in the interest of powerful political forces within the poor country itself to keep things this way...Egypt is poor precisely because it has been ruled by a narrow elite that have organized society for their benefit at the expense of the vast mass of people. Political power has been narrowly concentrated and used to create great wealth for those who possess it.” Ethiopia’s case is not dissimilar.

My concern is straight forward. Restrictions on human rights and lack of freedom of choice, reform and unwillingness to change the political system entail risks to Ethiopia in a similar way to that of Egypt. We see indicators of the worst in ethnic elite demonization of specific groups and specific leaders. In Ethiopia's case the ethnic and religious fissures that simmer today may not be contained by any force. 2/

Political Elite Capture

Political capture of the state by ethnic-elites under the guise of stability facilitates extraction of rent by ensuring that there is no independent institutional oversight to contain excesses; and no mechanism to bring abusive and corrupt officials at the top to a court of law. The legal system is subservient to political elites; independent press is non-existent. Civil society organizations have been wiped out. The incremental cost to the society in an environment of massive public spending without accountability is immense. For example, Global Financial Integrity, the University of Massachusetts and Ethiopian economists estimate that from 2000-2012 illicit outflow of money from Ethiopia is a staggering \$25 billion, almost all export earnings. Imagine what this staggering amount of financial capital can and would in creating industries, Ethiopian youth owned small and large scale commercial farms, small and medium size enterprises for girls and women, etc. No amount of foreign aid would serve as a substitute to using available resources to boost the capacities and capabilities of Ethiopians, especially youth.

Bribery, theft, graft, corruption and illicit outflow limit scarce capital that would have otherwise expanded productivity and employment. The social and demographic group that suffers most from this phenomenon is Ethiopia's youth. One often wonders why this group and elders that should know better do not do all they can to challenge the system that robs them and that keeps them poor. It is public knowledge that under the current system, there is direct correlation between the absence of independent institutions, free press, political competition and civic society and Ethiopia's outlier status. This condition is unlikely to change unless those who are denied opportunities to make a better life demand and struggle for their human, social and economic rights. At the country level, the fundamental policy and structural issues that keep Ethiopia a laggard in Africa will persist regardless of growth without sustainability and equity.

If we take the high flyers in SSA---Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa, etc., and Cheetahs breaking ground such as Ghana and Ivory Coast, Ethiopia has a long way to go before it joins the circle of Middle Income Countries (MICs). The success of these nations is correlated to good and representative governance. In these countries the rule of law and protection of human rights are norms. In large measure, FDI is predicated by shared prosperity rather than diplomatic leverage and foreign exchange for the governing party. This does not mean authoritarian states that deny human rights and freedoms do not grow. They do; and this is why they produce a few privileged rich individuals and families. Ethiopia's growth is narrow and skewed in favor of a limited few. In light of this, Ethiopia is performing at lower capacity compared to its potential. Limiting potential restrains opportunities for most and inequity takes firm roots that will be virtually impossible to reverse without a revolution.

There is ample documentary evidence showing that substantial potential for employment generation, higher incomes and productivity have been suffocated and stalled. Elite based crony capitalism is restrictive while broad-based participation is expansive. The private sector is crowded out by a regulatory system that favors the ethnic-elite state (telecommunications, power and land), party (all sectors) and party endowments. The TPLF created conglomerate known as the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) that started with no capital has amassed more than \$4 billion in assets. It has made politically connected individuals super rich. Ethiopia sits within a circle of conflict-ridden countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, fragile Eritrea; and Niger, one of the poorest in Africa. Ironically, Ethiopia is home to numerous new millionaires whose children attend elite schools in Western countries, India, China and other locations. A World Bank sponsored study identified endemic bribery, nepotism and corruption in the public sector as corrosive.

What do I propose?

Is there a way out of this quagmire? The answer is unequivocal yes. Ethiopian youth who are left out from the growth and wealth process need to wake up, overcome their fears, unify their efforts by collaborating with their peers across ethnic and religious lines and struggle for their dignity, self-worth, human rights, the rule of law and for a government that is accountable to them. No one will do

it for them. Those of us in the Diaspora, especially academics, intellectuals, professionals, artists, journalists, business women and men and others who enjoy human rights and freedoms can no longer afford to sit on the sides and let events determine the destiny of this and the coming generation. What is at stake is huge. If the current system continues, thousands of young people like Mohammed will continue to leave their country. Theft, bribery, graft, corruption and illicit outflow will continue regardless of government efforts. A systemic problem does not go away via pronouncements that those who created and sustain the system. Further, the viability of the country is at stake.

For these reasons, each of us needs to ask ourselves what type of legacy we wish to leave behind for generations to emulate? In this regard, we can learn from the capabilities and capacities we demonstrated in support of our compatriots who lost everything in Saudi Arabia and are now facing the hard reality of an uncertain future in their villages, towns and cities in Ethiopia. I should like to implant in the mind of the reader that dehumanization and injustice do not distinguish a person by ethnic, religious, gender and or other affiliation. It is an equalizer; so to speak.

Part V (c) will present overarching themes in political economy. The piece will contend that ethnic, religious and other forms of polarization among Ethiopian elites, including those in the Diaspora only serve the ruling party to prolong its grip. The proper response to polarization is not to imitate it. It is to turn it upside down and work collaboratively as Ethiopians for a governance that is fair, just and all inclusive. It is this legacy that generations will celebrate.

