

PART III

Reviewing the Damaging Effects of Ethiopian Diaspora Politics on the Wider Community and its Future Initiatives: The Search for Alternative Mechanisms – A Response to Readers’ Comments and Questions

By Maru Gubena

The title below, “*Can Democracy take Root in a Country where Family, Group Orientation and Regionalism are entrenched and Political Culture is lacking?*” is a sub-topic of a larger paper titled “*Reviewing the Damaging Effects of Ethiopian Diaspora Politics on the Wider Community and its Future Initiatives: The Search for Alternative Mechanisms,*” of which the first and second parts have already been published on various Ethiopian and friends of Ethiopia websites some weeks ago. It is in fact the final part of the larger paper, and was meant to be discussed and posted later, so I am clearly aware that some of you among my readers may be surprised, and see this short presentation as “putting the cart before the horse,” since I am posting this short text before writing up and publishing all of the related sub-topics. Yes, while admitting the applicability of the saying “putting the cart before the horse,” I would, however, say that this is not without a reason – a reason that somehow compelled me to produce this brief summary. More clearly, the reason for me to skip the two other important sub-topics for the moment and give a short review of the final sub-title is that, though many readers’ comments were based on emotions and far remote from the socio-cultural and political realities facing Ethiopia and its people today, a substantial number of the comments expressed and questions raised focused exclusively on issues related to this subject matter – the absence of a mature political culture in Ethiopian society.

As I mentioned in the second part of the larger article, soon after posting part one (and again, after the second part was posted), I received e-mails from readers with the most encouraging words and statements, a few of them exceptionally powerful and penetrating, to the point of awakening my long hidden feelings and painful memories. But I also have received a good number of e-mails from those who consider themselves as “proud Ethiopians and proud of their culture,” and who see our culture, not just as something “great, unique and special” that deserves the love and respect of all of us, but also as something “sacrosanct.” As a result, these “proud” Ethiopian compatriots appeared to be convinced, at least according to their e-mail messages, that our Ethiopian culture has little or nothing to do with the never-ending, increasing internal feuds and conflicts, including the long standing political repression and economic impoverishment that have continued to plague Ethiopians for decades and beyond. I also have the impression from the comments in the e-mails received that I, Maru Gubena, as someone who belongs to the generation of those who have voiced and demanded so relentlessly, tirelessly and selflessly for respect of the rule of law, for basic freedom and democracy in our country and for an equal distribution of Ethiopia’s economic resources and socio-political position, was personally responsible for the bloody upheavals of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution and its subsequent repercussions, including Ethiopia’s endless predicaments and sufferings. Additionally, the authors of these e-mails argued that, instead of simply supporting individual leaders of opposition political parties morally, financially and wholeheartedly so as to shorten the lifespan of Meles Zenawi’s regime, I was unnecessarily attacking our Ethiopian culture, which they consider to be sacrosanct and untouchable.

My response to such comments and charges is brief and simple. Even though the analysis, understandings and perspectives of Ethiopians about our culture may differ, in my entire lifetime I

have never personally met or seen a single Ethiopian who is not proud of his or her country, people and culture. It is also my view that looking more closely, constructively and critically at Ethiopia's culture and its multifaceted components, and its ability to accommodate different points of view, including the mindsets of Ethiopians in all our diversity, does not make a person different from others, including those "proud Ethiopians." In fact, someone with a profound interest and the capacity to critically and constructively examine, articulate and link Ethiopia's unhealed, painfully widening wounds and scars – wounds and scars that are to be found on the faces and other parts of the bodies of almost all Ethiopians of my generation – to our culturally molded attitudes and perceptions can and should probably be seen as more involved in and concerned about the persisting predicaments and sufferings of his or her country and people than those "proud and true children of Ethiopia," and in fact deserves the appreciation of socially, culturally and politically conscious Ethiopians. It is additionally useful and even healthy, at least in my view, to ask some serious, burning questions and examine them in a more mature and balanced way, if possible in a historical context, so as to understand why our problems persist, never coming to an end. In this I am grateful to all of those who have taken the time to send their comments and questions.

Having said this, let me now consider my topic for today. Also, in an attempt to respond to the questions put to me by my readers and to help trigger some interest for discussion with Ethiopian compatriots and friends of Ethiopia, I will do my best to raise a number of questions that I deem to be relevant in relation to the relentless issues that are under discussion.

Can Democracy take Root in a Country where Family, Group Orientation and Regionalism are entrenched and Political Culture is lacking?

The history of the nation state called Ethiopia, as we have been taught, is not only long but also complex, unique, and for some of us, enormously difficult to understand, unless one is willing to make lengthy and tremendously arduous efforts. The same is true for the history of the process of state formation of Ethiopia itself – how it came about. It is probably this process of state formation that has been a persistent source of protracted disputes and sporadic clashes between certain sections, small or large, of Ethiopia society. As was true for the process of state formation and the shaping face of Ethiopia, the basis for political leadership in Ethiopia has never been dependent upon the choices of the people; it has always been determined by the will and desire of those with more power and personal influence, as well as support from the well-known members of their extended family and the groups, networks and region(s) to which the supposed individual ruler or rulers belong, who with great conviction believe that they themselves are the "Elect of God," assigned to rule the land and its people, due either to their personal skills and wisdom or to their heredity. More essentially, except for a few individuals closely linked to certain rulers or socio-political positions, Ethiopians in general have had little or nothing to say about those who rule them, or about what was and is good or bad for them and their country. It is evident that the active participation of Ethiopians in both traditional and recent politics has been limited to a singing and dancing role in the coronation ceremonies of their rulers, and to defending, not just their country from foreign enemies and invaders, but also their kings or emperors from their personal internal opponents and from other interest groups. Consequently, Ethiopians have never had the opportunity either to face or to test the fruits of being ruled under a democratically structured political system, democratically elected leadership and the rule of law, or to learn the precise meaning of the terms, "basic individual freedoms," or "the rule of law and democracy," with their multi-faceted components.

Also, as the experience of the past four or more decades has shown, and because Ethiopia has not, or to a very limited degree, been open to learning from the cultural and political processes in other nations, the development process of Ethiopian society has been determined only by the needs and aspirations of successive rulers, who have emphasized our superiority. As a consequence, in general terms the majority of Ethiopians, if not almost the entire population, are extremely proud of the history and culture of their country and of those who shaped the Ethiopian culture and molded the attitudes and behaviours of Ethiopians. For these reasons Ethiopians today tend to remain, at least

internally, solidly attached to their convictions: proud of their culture and their previous rulers. The direct and indirect result is that the contemporary Ethiopian society, both individually and collectively, is not fascinated by or even interested in the creativity and dynamism of modern socio-political cultures and the technological advancements of other nations. Our society is not flexible and or open enough to adopt the most indispensable political elements, systems and technological advancements of other countries, even when these could in fact be conducive to modifying or perhaps even transforming certain dysfunctional cultural elements and individual attitudes and behaviours – advancements that could help to decrease our glaring poverty and shameful health conditions, that could extend the life expectancy of our people; lead to economic improvement and development of various fields and sectors; and more importantly, help to forge an effective common bond that would expand or create the badly needed peace and tranquility within Ethiopian society.

In conclusion, it would not be wrong to say that these dysfunctional, detrimental cultural elements, attitudes and behaviours have unquestionably remained, forming a permanent and immovable bottleneck to forging an effective common bond among Ethiopians, to the cultivation of a modern organizational and political culture, to a relatively democratic system, and to the establishment and expansion of civil society in the land of Ethiopia.

The most difficult and still more painful question, which most of us prefer not to discuss or even to hear about, is then: can democracy, with its many essential components, take root in a country where modern political culture is entirely absent or non-existent; whose people themselves appear to be historically and culturally oriented to family and group, regionalist and undemocratic, with little or no love for Ethiopia as a nation state, and who, paradoxically enough, choose to remain in conflict and animosity with each other above forging bonds, working and living side by side in peace and harmony with others who also belong to the land of Ethiopia?

For the reasons indicated above, including a further response to the questions and comments of readers, and because others who have not yet responded may disagree, I imagine, with my statements here or in previously posted articles, I pose the following additional questions in the hope that many, if not all, of you will be ready – and have the courage – to respond, so that I and others can understand and learn from your views and assessments.

To start with: where should we search for the sources of our deep-seated and unrelenting resentment, vindictiveness, endless internal feuds and conflicts, and our persistent predicaments and sufferings, either political or economic, if not within our culture and the complete absence of common bonds among us as a nation, both at home and in the Diaspora? Otherwise how do we explain the complex, interlinked and never-ending tragedies and the acute and prolonged crisis of trust and confidence from which we suffer painfully, and which are responsible for making our country and its people a permanent beggar nation? What other factors and role players might be responsible for prolonging the regimes of our succession of repressive rulers, and for making these cruel, greedy leaders almost exclusively dependent upon outsiders and outside forces, rather than on their own people, whom they rule with the barrel of a gun, in the complete absence of a modern, mature political culture? What could the explanation be? No one could argue that Ethiopia lacks the necessary natural resources to feed its people and enrich itself, so how has Ethiopia come to be such a famine- and conflict-prone nation, often suffering horrendous and costly devastation? Aren't all these tragedies the direct and indirect results of our culturally molded mentalities and habits – our inability to live and work together peacefully, as responsible citizens?

Further, what reasons lie behind the consistent choices of some members of our Diaspora community to single-handedly visit various departments of European and US ministries and to produce fruitless letters directed at western Parliamentarians and US Senators, rather than to visit or write to them using a collective voice? If not from our culture, where did we acquire these seemingly irremovable habits, with the addiction to “going it alone” when it comes to the well being of our people and to many of the issues of our country? Why on earth, if not due to our cultural perceptions, rigidly

molded attitudes and behaviours, are we, as members of the Ethiopian Diaspora community, unable to organize ourselves under a single roof and turn our divided but most skillful, highly educated and experienced community members into a peaceful force for diplomacy, a productive warehouse to help educate ourselves as a community in areas including communications and the meaning and functions of democracy; to help enrich our community with knowledge and organizational culture; and to wage convincing, wisely envisioned and crafted diplomatic wars against the repressive and successive regimes and systems that have been and are still dragging our country and its people backward?

How come we don't get mad at ourselves, don't get jealous and confront ourselves with loaded questions about the fact that many countries, including Pakistan, Nepal, Kenya and Zimbabwe – which have experienced more or less the same upheavals as our country – have nevertheless eventually been able, after countless bitter and sometimes treacherous discussions, confrontations and diplomatic and physical wars, to settle the dust of their potentially dangerous differences and conflicts, accepting each other and each others' viewpoints and policies, to work together and live side by side?

Also, isn't it because we do not have our own Diaspora House that all of the indispensable, essential documents, recorded video and audio related to Ethiopia's historical and current events are to be found, not in one library or at least in an organized list, identifying resources to be found in community organizations or community libraries, but rather, scattered across the private living rooms of individual Ethiopian Diaspora community members? Why is it that we, as an Ethiopian Diaspora community, do not own our own relatively mature, cultured community media outlets, such as radio, professionally organized magazines, newspapers, websites, and other related means of communications capable of embracing of all segments and views of our community? How can we explain the fact that each of us within the Ethiopian Diaspora is exclusively dependent upon individually owned, generally unprofessionally organized communications media, including websites whose owners often, if not always, behave like lovers, exclusively committed to a few individuals who contribute articles? Does it make sense for active community members and article contributors to be dependent on the goodwill, health, time – and individual judgment, whether socially or politically motivated – of media outlet owners for the publication of book reviews, articles, announcements and advertisements?

Even though I am clearly aware that every individual in a given community can't be and need not be involved in the political activities of their country, nevertheless I wonder how we are to explain the fact that fewer than one in a thousand, or perhaps two thousand, among the Diaspora community are doing more than talking randomly, and are instead thinking and writing in an organized way about issues related to the problems facing our country and its people? Should we really believe the unsubstantiated assumptions stated by some individuals, who say that these huge numbers of Ethiopian compatriots, those who are not involved and not thoughtfully discussing Ethiopian politics and the related problems, "don't care and don't really love their country?"

Finally, I actually wonder – perhaps with other readers – about the views of my "proud" Ethiopian compatriots. How would they respond to the questions raised above?

Having put my efforts and energy together in an attempt, not just to review the historical and cardinal foundation of Ethiopian leadership, including its family, group and regionalist nature, but also to respond as realistically and constructively as I could to statements made and questions raised by the readers of my recently published parts one and two of this article, and having raised a number of essential and mind-provoking questions in an attempt to expand the debates and discussions that have already been initiated, I will now turn my attention to alternative directions and mechanisms and do my best to provide ideas on organizational processes and discourses that I hope can help to mend bridges among us, and to revive and strengthen the bonds that previously existed among our forefathers.

Coming soon: The Search for Alternative directions and Mechanisms: Concluding Remarks

Dear readers: the remaining section of the entire paper (“*Reviewing the Damaging Effects of Ethiopian Diaspora Politics on the Wider Community and its Future Initiatives: The Search for Alternative Mechanisms*”) is coming soon, and will be titled “*The Search for Alternative directions and Mechanisms: Concluding Remarks*.” Initially this was to be published together with the text above (part three), but for smooth reading and because I attach a high value to the alternatives and remarks it contains, I thought it would be wiser and even more readable to publish them separately. For me this final section is a must-read text, the backbone of the entire paper, and I hope not only that the alternatives suggested and concluding remarks will receive broad attention, but also that they will lead to a fruitful discussion. In addition to briefly reviewing the body of the entire paper and the reasons behind the persistent reluctance of Ethiopian Diaspora political movements, their interest groups and supporters to pay attention to the repeatedly made proposals to establish a single, united and respected Ethiopian Diaspora House – an institution that functions professionally and embraces all of the segments of the Ethiopian Diaspora community – this section will provide bold and unambiguous alternatives to the current course of Ethiopian Diaspora politics and our political groupings. In its closing remarks, the paper envisages a gloomy future, with a painfully disappointing conclusion for who have even minimal expectations for concrete results from Diaspora politics, if the current course continues. The paper ends with a forceful but bleak statement:

“...Without having the required confidence in each other, we will not be able to work closely together, and without working hand in glove, all the efforts we have been and are making from time to time, whether individually or in small groups, will be fruitless, and will even produce more tension, anxiety, frustration and pain within the Ethiopian Diaspora community and for the people of Ethiopia at large. And we, as the Ethiopian Diaspora community, will continue to mature within our own family and group circles and will die as scattered and as hostile to each other as we are today, exactly as a sizable number of the “White Russian Refugees” of 1920 and 1940, who, due to their failure to agree and to work together against the Bolsheviks who seized power during the October Russian Revolution of 1917, melted almost without a trace into the beautiful western mountains, into peaceful and relaxing rural landscapes and wealthy capitalist societies, to the point where no one today would notice either their origin or culture....”

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