

NES Commentary No.11



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Title: Promoting Millennium Hopes to Learn How to Innovate a Democratic System in Ethiopia: Continue to generate more and more activities until September 2008 at least!

1. Inspiring Quotes

“I could see that my countrymen would face certain humiliation unless they modernized.”

Hakim Workeneh quoted from his Diary from Bahru’s **Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia**

“Can we really say that we Ethiopians are independent? Independence does not consist in merely having one’s own government. It presupposes self- sufficiency. And the people of Ethiopia have yet to be self-sufficient.”

Gebra Yiwot Baykedagn, **‘Mengist ena ye hizb Astadader’**, 1953 EC

“A beautiful country and an object of admiration for foreigners, has now become a citadel of-- bloodshed injustice, evil and shame because her unity has been destroyed through discord.”

Aleqa Taye

“A people without intelligence have no constitutional government or lawful government, and hence no secure power. The source of of all power is ‘serat’, not the size of the army. A small town that is governed by law is to be preferred to a large nation that has no ‘serat’.”

Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn quoted from Bahru’s book **Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia...**

2. Introduction

Modernisation and unification of Ethiopia took place at the same time as the European scramble for Africa was raging. Besides the kings who were engaged in these double projects based on an understanding that fed a particular practice and the vice versa, there were also intellectuals (some of whom have been quoted above) that started to ring the alarm bell that unless reform and changes are brought with discipline, hard work and determination, Ethiopia would remain the twin victims of disunity and hunger. That warning that bellowed out from the writings of the intellectuals in the reign of Menelik and later Lij Iyassu, Queen Zewditu and Ras Tefferi, sadly, remains to this day true. Ethiopia has not come out of the woods of disunity and hunger however difficult to concede this situation that continues to limit human possibility in this beautiful land.

What is remarkable is that when one reads what the intellectuals in 1900, 1920s and early 30s and in the immediate post war period diagnosed as Ethiopia's problems are still sadly with us today. If we are not careful they will remain to haunt us in the future too! Those of us who write so much about Ethiopia should look back and hear how exacerbated and impatient such intellectuals like Hakim Workeneh Eshete, Kentiba Gebru Desta, Onesimos Nasib, Negadras Gebrehiot Baykedagn, Negadras Afework Gebre Yesus, Bejerond TekeleHawariat Tekel Mariam, Aleka Taye Gebere Mariam, Belatta Heruy Walde Selassie and others have been to see Ethiopia modernise and develop. Some even went to the extent of contemplating the unthinkable, to wit, if the feudal leadership of the times could not live up to the task of modernising the country, perhaps the British and Italians should be invited! These are thoughts Ethiopians consider treasonous then and today.

What it shows in reality is not that these intellectuals did not love their country, but they were desperate to see change. And unfortunately to this day a structural modernisation that has altered radically the foundation of the social- economic system in Ethiopia has not taken place in the sense of seeing a wholesale transformation of the agrarian condition and the lived experience of the 80 % peasant population. The problem they grappled with is still with us. Not much has changed after a more than hundred years of talking to bring such changes that make a difference to the lives of the people!

3. Modernisation is still yet to come!

A century has passed since these intellectuals sounded the clarion call of modernisation. We are still yet to see a thorough going transformative modernisation. Many political events and episodes have taken place since the last century. Different ideologies and intellectuals of all hues and colours have appeared. Political movements have arisen and declined. Armed warfare's have raged. Ethnic politics has been constitutionally emboldened. The country has gone through many ups and downs. With all these changes, the key matter that must be transformed has not been transformed. And that is organising and re-organising the state- society relations to produce citizenship rights where the Ethiopians emerge as citizens with full rights where the state is made accountable through laws and institutions to protecting and expanding these rights. It is only when the state is rooted in society and valorises citizenship rights honestly and legitimately that it can become truly a developmental state or a transformative agency to change the condition and well being of the peasantry irrespective of the ethnic affiliation the peasantry happen to belong to.

Today we have the fencing off of citizens into collective units and ethnic enclaves and we are treated to the discourse of decentralisation along ethnic lines where instead of the citizen the representative of the ethnic unit is entrusted to speak for citizens divided along ethnic contour lines and geographies. Under the feudal times it was land that was parcelled under different lords and

dominions. Under the ethnic enclosure it is the citizen that is sacrificed in the name of the ethnic entitlement of the ethnic and vernacular identity of the group. Political commerce and speculation on identity has supplanted the production of citizenship rights by reframing and democratising the state-society interaction, communication and transaction. This has destroyed both the prospect of democracy and development based on the production of citizenship rights, the formation and building of a society-state nexus that roots state legitimacy on society and citizen on the one hand, and conversely accountability of the state to the citizen and society on the other.

4. Millennium Activities Must Continue

If there is anything new this generation of thinking Ethiopians can add it is not by repeating *ad nauseam* what the earlier generation of intellectuals have diagnosed so well. It is by creating a new social practice and scrambling to unite in order to rooting a new democratic civilisation in Ethiopia. It is this task that is waiting to be done. It is this task, if done well, that is bound and will likely put Ethiopia on a sure foundation of structural transformation and modernisation. Those who have been striving to create a democratic civilisation in Ethiopia cannot afford to be distracted by so many issues that inevitably and naturally arise in the process of the journey of discovery of change. They must not be deflected from the goals of uniting the many to defeat the few that obstruct the birth of a democratic system to create a new society. Everything hinges on the birth of a sustainable democratic system in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's standing in the region from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, Africa and the world depends on it. The long delayed realisation of the dream of modernity and democracy must be fulfilled. Those who obstruct this great call by allowing themselves to be distracted are indeed committing historic errors.

NES calls them to think hard, think big, and think with principle, think with commitment, think with mission before other concerns, and above all call them to learn to ignore pettiness, insults and other cantankerous behaviours to advance the united pan-Ethiopian democratic national movement to reach all Ethiopians both inside and outside the country. It must not be *de ja vu* time. This must be a different time never to repeat the expensive cost Ethiopia has endured for a century by its delayed modernisation due to various divisions and mishaps! This is time to prioritise country, people and nation over self. It is time for all to come forward and step in to support the people and the country to create the most sustainable democratic system and civilisation that can be the envy of all in the world. **Only when the generations that currently dabble in politics succeed to unite and advance the pan-Ethiopian national democratic renewal and civilisation can we say they have made a difference.** Otherwise nothing new has been added. It is old wine in new bottle as they say. NES hopes the effort and sacrifice this time would bear new results and not repeat past mistakes.

5. Round Table Discussion in Aalborg University

On October 1, 2007, a roundtable on the topic: "Abating and Growing: Poverty and Conflict in the Ethiopian Millennium in the World Today" took place where post graduate students from the University and others participated. Students from every corner of the world engaged in a lively discussion after introductory remarks from the convenor (Mammo Muchie), Dr Opoku-Mensah from Ghana, and Dr. Li Xing from China who together introduced the roundtable after a lecture from the convenor.

The purpose of the Roundtable is to introduce and let people know that Ethiopia has its own millennium nearly eight years after those who subscribe to the Gregorian system celebrated their millennium, and show them the way Ethiopians count makes enormous sense. Whilst this information in itself is interesting, the larger goal is to continue and encourage all Ethiopians to

continue to use the whole year until September 11, 2008 at the very least to spreading millennium hopes by focusing on all the issues that are blocking progress and understanding to move Ethiopia forward. We hope the round table will provide a small example to continue education using millennium hopes. As one writer put it words, symbols, beliefs and moments provide us food for thought. We use them to advance our favourite experiments. **For Ethiopians the most favourite experiment is to see rooted in Ethiopia's state-society relation a democratic civilisation working for the citizens of Ethiopia. This is the most timely and urgent obligation of all thinking Ethiopians today.**

“Humans respond to symbols, such as words, ideas, concepts, opinions, emotions, projections, and beliefs. We join social movements because of abstract beliefs, certain words can galvanize us to group action or involve us in mass hysteria, emotions motivate us to join mobs, we join discussion groups and academic classes to share ideas, we marry because of love, we create armies because of fear of invasion, and we socialise because of friendship. We assign meaning to things that have no physical substance. These mental constructs interact with reality in such complex ways that some philosophers question whether our worlds are physical reality or cognitive illusions. Reality or not, they catalyze us to create complex webs of alliances that we call social structure” (Russ Marion, *The Edge of Organisation: Chaos and Complexity Theories of Formal Social Systems*; Sage Pub. 199.p.51)

Let us all respond to the millennium in a constructive and positive spirit to create a modernising and democratic social structure in Ethiopia.

5.1. Imitation of East Asian Developmental State not acceptable

Dr. Opoku- Mensah made the point that we cannot imitate the East Asian developmental state in Africa. He said in Africa and indeed in Ethiopia, the key space or nexus is the state-society relation from which citizenship social, political and economic rights reside. Development comes through citizenship rights and not by suppressing those rights. Development and democracy cannot be separated. They must be integrated. The East Asian model has its own national features that cannot be replicated to the Ethiopian context. This argues strongly against the thesis of replicating development with authoritarianism from East Asia that has been flouted by some of the leaders of the EPDRF today.

Dr. Li Xing spoke why China was able to reduce or abate poverty. He mentioned a number of factors such as China's political and ideological stability, institutional innovation, united national direction, capability to mobilising domestic energy and resources for economic development, learning by trial and by making mistakes, China always maintains policy independence and not succumbing to international pressure and the huge role played by the China's Diaspora in funnelling resources, knowledge and skills.

Dr. Xing also discussed the Chinese engagement with Ethiopia/Africa by saying there are two views. The first point is that China offers opportunities and alternatives to the International Financial Institutions. The second is that China might become an 'imperialist' power. At present the Chinese approach to Africa is business orientated and infrastructure building orientated. This intervention stimulated the audience that came from many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, New Zealand and Europe. Most of the questions concentrated on the primacy of commerce vs.

human rights, where the audience questioned whether it is fine for China not to take into account human rights violations in its dealings with African regimes.

An interesting question that came from the floor related to the problem of whether breaking or uniting existing states is to be preferred. It was argued when Norway seceded from Sweden in 1905, there was no war that followed. But when Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia, a war followed and there is still no clarity how the matter might come to a closure. A Tanzanian and few Nigerian students argued that a lot of the reason why such problems persist by drawing examples from their own respective countries is because legitimacy and institution building fall far short than would be necessary to sustain a unity project.

The round table generated excitement and the Ethiopian millennium was celebrated by people from all over the world with a wish by all to see Ethiopia pick up democratisation and modernisation this time with an irreversible energy and dynamism. This activity shows that more and more activities can be generated that can inform and generate educational opportunities to bring understanding and people together.

6. If elites are divided sooner or later the people will be divided too!

One of the biggest problems in Ethiopia is the elite. Inter-elite contradictions exist everywhere. This has time and time again exposed the country and even the best laid plans to come to no fruition. We see elites within the rulers slugging off each other. We see elites within the opposition doing the same.

Often one wonders whether the very larger goal for standing for principle, people and country failing to inhibit them from engaging in such ugly slanders and mutual victimisations. Those who stand for country and people and respect the cause would be circumspect, exercise caution, and would be very slow to condemn anyone by showing humility in the face of the cause they pursue. But we see often no such grander purpose.

We see everyone degrading to a petty gossip and soiling the very cause they say they stand for. It is a shame. It is sad. It is ugly. Time and time again, our country has suffered and even lost its brightest children for apparently no good reason. This has to change. The cause has to come first. Democratising Ethiopia brooks no delay.

One hundred years has gone by when we fret and fight over trifles. Let all of us stand tall and tower high by reaching the higher purpose of thought thinking itself to clarify our purposes and directions. We call for democracy now. A democratic system must be implanted.

A democratic civilisation and renaissance comes first. Rise up and live up to this expectation and realising this goal. Talk less and do more. Harming or distracting the broadest possible democratic mobilisation that this country has witnessed in recent times is inexcusable. Promote a united democratic movement that can create stability, demolish the ideology of ethnic hatred and restore Ethiopia to join the community of democratic nations with total clarity. Then all can see what difference this democratic-modernity realisation brings to the people and nation, the region, Africa and the world.

7. Concluding Remark

The millennium hopes must continue. The movement to build the strongest, deepest and broadest movement to democratise and modernise Ethiopia must not tire to climb new heights and mountain tops. There is a whole year where activities to learn to come together to foster inter elite understanding and fellowship must continue. It will be gracious and even wonderful if the regime in Ethiopia could reach out to all who criticise it and use the millennium year to lead and bring about the most possible conversation and debate or learning by fighting in a cordial atmosphere. If this climate can be created inside Ethiopia, the millennium hopes would indeed be said to have borne fruit.

But even the opposition both inside and outside should learn the fact that what it is saying has been said before as we pointed out at the outset here; what is needed is to create a democratic civilisation and system by uniting and not splitting, by coming together with principle and by not spreading vile propaganda against one another. We would like to see people who seek power first and foremost-uppermost-to put the country and the people first before all else. Making a democratic system by uniting all those who can be unite-able comes first. Let us do it.

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