

Why the European Union, Canada and the USA Need a Unified and Prosperous Ethiopia

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Part I of II

My argument in this commentary is that a Balkanized, tribal, sectarian, conflict ridden, oppressed, repressed, dependent and corrupt Ethiopia won't be of any value to Western democracies. I am, however, totally convinced that an all-inclusive, just, empowering, prosperous and democratic Ethiopia will serve as a beacon of peaceful coexistence among the country's diverse set of religions, ethnic and social groups; and will propel Ethiopian society and the entire Horn of Africa to sustainable and equitable development. The West must believe in Ethiopia's durability and potential. It must stop sending mixed signals. Mixed signals will only serve the forces of separatism, fundamentalism and terrorism. Ethiopia lost its historical and legitimate access to the sea because of external intrigues and mixed signals from without; and a determined anti-Ethiopian forces from within. The second most populous country, and at one time a maritime nation, lost its ports. This is patently unfair and unjust.

Western democracies often forget the historical fact that Ethiopia is among the world's centers of ancient civilizations. As compelling, Ethiopia had a well-established system of state and government before most European countries evolved as independent nation-states. Both suggest that the historical and cultural causes for optimism and hope remain relatively intact.

Ethiopia is, potentially, one of the most promising countries on the planet. First and foremost, the country's **quarreling political elites** must decide whether or not they wish to harness this enormous potential for the betterment of all Ethiopians; or undo the country all together. If the later, everyone, including Ethiopia's' foreign friends will lose big time. I suggest this: No county! No power and no wealth! No country! No honor or dignity! Millions will become refugees.

We Ethiopian political and social elites often lose sight of the big picture of why Ethiopia continues to be poor, technologically backward and perpetually dependent? I can tell you it is not the weather or the people or the land. I suggest strongly that Ethiopia is not poor because of Ethiopians. It is not poor because of its diversity and diverse cultures. The question of why it continues to be poor and dependent should be answered by all stakeholders including donors and diplomats in Addis Ababa who continue to shore up Ethiopia's governing elites, especially members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This group that still calls itself a "liberation front" is anathema to Ethiopia's territorial integrity, national independence and sovereignty; and the inclusive development of its 104 million people. Tribal thinking results in trivial outcomes.

As far as I know, no single Ethiopian wishes to remain poor or dependent or to become a refugee!! On the contrary, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation, Ethiopians work as hard

as anyone in the world to better themselves and their families by any means necessary. Imagine then what freedom would do in releasing their creativity, innovation and productivity. This won't occur without an enabling regulatory framework, a good governance environment and a competent and dedicated political leadership that believes in the fundamental democratic principle that political power resides in free people who must possess the right to confidently demand accountability from their political representatives. Contrast this right with Ethiopia's self-elected elites, who, year after year, prolong their rule through the barrel of the gun and the perfection of sneak diplomacy, for instance, by lobbying using public funds to buy friends. The funds for this lobbying effort might actually come from loans, grants, commercial and other credits, receipts from the Diaspora etc. This is because the party that rules Ethiopia does not have an independent source of income. It uses the public purse to abuse the public. It declared a state of emergency 10 months ago and crushed all dissent.

I would like donors and diplomats in Addis Ababa to know that the state of emergency is producing the opposite effect of defiance against the entire system. At the local level, it has created a wedge and huge and perhaps irreversible gulf between representatives of the ruling party, especially the top echelons of the TPLF who manage and run the command posts and the vast majority of Ethiopians. Ordinary people in Oromia, Amhara, Konso, Gambella and other regions have effectively concluded that the state of emergency that is commanded by the TPLF is intended solely to prolong TPLF rule, protect Tigreans and their investments throughout the country and keep Ethiopians in "their place." I am totally convinced that the TPLF/EPRDF can no longer rule without massive killing and the incarceration of millions of Ethiopians. I am totally convinced that Ethiopia won't sustain the same growth rate in the next decade or two that it has in the past decade.

I say this because Ethiopia's rulers have failed to address the root causes that engulfed the country with popular unrest and defiance. My estimation is that Ethiopians will rise up against the system once the state of emergency is lifted. This time, the regime may not be able to contain the society and subdue protestors. This time the damage in property and the loss of lives will be incalculable. Therefore, the time for donors, diplomats, and more important for Ethiopians to act is not tomorrow but today.

Donors and diplomats in Addis Ababa must be persuaded of the notion that what eludes Ethiopian society is not the lack of aspiration and zeal among Ethiopians to overcome debilitating poverty and perpetual dependency. Ethiopians value their self-worth, humanity and history as much as anyone.

I am among those born in a poor village who made it at the global level by studying, working and competing hard. There are legions of Ethiopians and other Africans like me. The hurdle I see is the persistence of a political system that does not care for the public good; and that does the least in empowering Ethiopians, especially the poor and the marginalized. Those in power care less about the people they rule. As tragic, they care less about the natural environment in which they rule. The TPLF watches the destruction of Lake Tana and its environs. Its media

keeps silent while the lake is being destroyed. Experts tell me that the chemical that is devastating the Lake, the fishery industry, adjacent agriculture etc. that supports millions of people can be treated. This requires a government that cares both for the people and for the environment.

Members of the TPLF and the cronies that cater to it care less about fair and equitable treatment of Ethiopian citizens regardless of ethnicity. I can provide the reader with a plethora of evidence that Ethiopian political and civic elites rarely, if ever, place the interests of the country and its diverse population ahead of themselves. This is why they are shamelessly rich. This is why billions of dollars of wealth is stolen illicitly and taken out Ethiopia. In fact, they often use ethnic and religious differences, identity and liberation as a camouflage in aggrandizing financial, economic and political power for themselves, their families and friends. For sure, these self-appointed elites see themselves as the primary guardians of their ethnic group to which they have emotional affinity. The Gondar area is a center of civil conflict because the TPLF annexed and incorporated into Greater Tigray large tracts of fertile lands. The destruction of Lake Tana seems to be part of a sinister scheme to impoverish the region's population that is predominantly Amhara.

The donor and diplomatic community in Addis Ababa must be persuaded that the TPLF and allied elites are intolerant of ***peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic*** and religious groups that had defined Ethiopia's long and distinguished history. The TPLF is especially adept in the art of "reengineering and reinventing" of culture and history; in obliterating national institutional assets; in reducing the sizes of specific ethnic groups while increasing others; and in creating make-believe growth figures and selling them to a broad set of global audiences. Intolerant and exclusionary elites create fertile grounds for extremism and terrorism.

The ethnic federal system the TPLF and its ethnic elite allies established has been instrumental in obliterating Ethiopian national identity and in restraining the evolution of political pluralism in Ethiopia. Instead, the system has succeeded in promoting the mushrooming of ethnic-based political parties that now exceed 65. It is reasonable to assume today that each of Ethiopia's 80 plus ethnic groups has its own political elite and its own political party. Today, the locus of contention is the control of natural resources within regions, for example arable lands. This preoccupation of barring "others" from owning lands is a form of Apartheid. Apartheid was a failure.

The TPLF and its ethnic allies are persuaded that manufacturing ethnic parties is a sure way of maintaining political power. The donor and diplomatic community must therefore be persuaded in the notion that, at most, Ethiopia does not need or cannot afford 65 ethnic based parties. At most, Ethiopia must be willing and ready to push for the formation of four or five major multiethnic parties. In the medium term, I can even buy the notion of large ethnic parties that embrace Ethiopia's territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty. In the long term, ethnic and religious parties should be barred from formation. Ghana is an excellent model in this area.

A quarter century of one party rule in Ethiopia informs us that the greater the number of “parties,” the greater is the staying power of the TPLF/EPRDF.

Nothing in terms of policy or structure will change as long as this manufacturing of ethnic and fringe parties that are subordinate to the TPLF/EPRDF continues. By the way, it is not our diversity that is a problem and a barrier in the advancement of democracy. Rather, it is the misuse and abuse in the ethnicization of politics by elites.

Isn't a quarter of a century of one party rule not enough?

For more than a quarter of a century the TPLF/EPRDF propagated the flawed notion that multiethnic countries are inherently conflict prone. Its Constitution made it legal to secede. This misleading and self-serving narrative has enabled the TPLF, a minority ethnic group, to rule Ethiopia through deliberate and systematic inculcation of ethnic fear and mutual suspicion; a spying network that is well-financed through the public purse; and a system of perpetual divide and rule.

Both the Amhara and Oromo will continue to pay enormous prices if they subscribe to the TPLF cunning machination that one “will rise up against the other.” Ethiopia would not have achieved victory at the Battle of Adwa if the Oromo and Amhara people had not unified their forces in defense of freedom. Ethiopia is a product of diverse forces pulling together. It is these same forces that will propel it to prosperity.

Contrary to the TPLF and allied edict, Ethiopia is not the only country in the world with a diverse population. It is the only one in Africa today where the country's rulers inculcate fear and apply draconian laws to suppress dissent and sow seeds of divide and rule. The TPLF criminalized free and independent media and decimated civil society because it has no confidence in democracy.

Democracy is always work in progress. Nigeria is not perfect; but it is a democratic state and a work in progress. It is home to **529 ethnic groups**. They are all proud to call themselves Nigerians!! Currently, there are 29 registered political parties in Nigeria. Remarkably, the number of civil society organizations including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that promote good governance, anti-corruption, disseminate information, raise political and social awareness, provide humanitarian assistance, advance the rule of law and deepen democracy has **“leapfrogged” to over 30,000**. Nigerians support their CSOs as much as they support their political parties. Anyone who remembers Biafra would remember the pitfalls of tribalism and secession in Africa.

Abah, Danladi, Department of History, Benue State University Makurdi, & Adihikon Tanko Department of History & Diplomatic Studies, Federal University Wukari of Nigeria write in “Civil Society and Democratic Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic” that “Civil society groups in Nigeria have been indispensable actors in the democratization process especially since the return to civil rule in 1999.” Nigeria confirms that CSOs are the life line of democratic societies.

The democratization process in Nigeria has its own unique history. Nigerians have adopted it to suit their specific needs. I tend to believe in the premise that “No democracy worthy its name is the same.” What I find common in most democracies is the institutionalization of “We the people” and not “We” are this or that tribe!! The biggest democracy in the world, India, and the most powerful country on the planet, the USA, are the leading examples of “We the people.” Long ago in an American high school, I remember reading de Tocqueville’s book “Democracy in America” and his captivating description of the vital and empowering role of civil society and non-governmental organizations that mushroomed throughout the country and gave meaning to democracy. They persist to this day. Every village, every town and city, every profession, every faith group etc. is home to a slew of CSOs and NGOs. In India, CSOs and NGOs are the movers and shakers of the society.

The bottom line is this. Where there is no civil society, there is no democracy. Where civil society thrives, democracy takes roots and blossoms. Tyrannical, authoritarian and dictatorial governments find CSOs and NGOs to be anathema to their cruel and corrupt governance. A society such as Ethiopia’s that is deliberately and systematically divided along ethnic lines is in a weak position to defend and advance the democratization process. This division makes Ethiopia vulnerable to external threats and environmental catastrophe. So, ethnic elites are wrong in preaching to the rest of us that the TPLF/EPRDF agenda of ethnic political formation and leadership has merit. It does not. What common social welfare or Ethiopia-wide criteria does the TPLF agenda meet?

Indonesia is ethnically diverse. It is among the largest democracies in the world. It is a vibrant and most tolerant society that I have been privileged to observe on numerous World Bank missions. This is a fascinating nation where tolerance is rooted in the culture. The largest Muslim country in the world is also **home to 707 ethnic groups**. It has 46 registered political parties. More telling is the fact that Indonesia is home **to 48,886 civil society organizations** that are “registered at the Ministry of Law and Human Rights.” These CSOs make Indonesia’s democracy vibrant and dynamic. Members of Indonesia’s mosaic of people call themselves Indonesian.

Just think of this contrasting fact. The rulers of Ethiopia cannot tolerate tens of CSOs and NGOs let alone thousands. Ethiopia’s rulers are scared of multiethnic parties but unafraid of segregated and weak ethnic parties that cater to them subordinate themselves to them. They are especially scared of free and independent media and CSOs.

In brief, in all these democratic countries the most vibrant, significant and competitive parties are national and not ethnic. The number of multinational and competitive parties is fairly limited. They are driven by policy issues. Collaboration among parties is not uncommon. Nor are Coalitions.

To be continued

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