

• Evaluating Three Decades of Ethiopian Resistance, its Challenges, Achievements and Failures: Perspectives for Political and Leadership Change

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Almost all relatively professional institutions or political organizations see an evaluation – or a brief presentation of policy-related activities or past experience – as a healthy and even vitally important part of both growth and development, whether this involves the general public or individuals who are involved and interested in the organization’s activities. Both large and medium-sized organizations see an evaluation or such a report as tools of understanding, cooperation, integrity, confidence building and a source of motivation for active members and financial contributors. More importantly, it is from an evaluation of outcomes and results, whether intended or unintended, that we draw lessons, learn, and correct or redirect policies and policy-related projects. In some extreme cases, however, and depending on the nature and size of the organization, an evaluation can stimulate or force a leader or leaders to revisit the original vision – the very foundation upon which the organization has been constructed – to see if it can be adjusted and whether the existence of the organization can be maintained.

Whether the policy makers or leadership of a political grouping or organization will begin an evaluation depends a great deal upon the organizational structures and strength that are present. Other more specific factors are also potentially important determinants: the attitude or frame of mind of the leadership, the amount of confidence the leadership has in the functioning of their organization, and, most importantly, the overall capacity of the organization in terms of finance, professional manpower and the amount of output. The production of an evaluation or review of an activity and its release to a given section of the society depends as well upon what can be called “push factors,” which help to stimulate this activity. For example, to what extent do the registered and financially contributing members to the organization or political grouping expect this? Are they interested – do they perhaps even demand to know – the achievements, challenges or failures of the organization they belong to and support? Other factors among the many that can be cited as push factors are governmental and/or non-governmental funding institutions that are entitled to request or even demand that the organization present the overall results of its activities to them and perhaps also to the larger public. Leaders of political parties in economically and politically stable societies, who are often interested in knowing the extent of legitimacy and support they are accorded by the people, do present their evaluations of ups and downs to their members from time to time, often face to face in a huge publicly organized gatherings in the presence of the media so that the general public can participate and form an opinion about the political party – for example, the degree of concern it shows for the wellbeing of the society and how this is demonstrated by its previous engagements and future programmes.

What about the case of the Ethiopian resistance? What do we, as part of its public and as political consumers, know about the historical records of the Ethiopian resistance, and more specifically, about its achievements, challenges and failures? What do we actually know about the complex sources and causes that have been responsible for the failures of repeated efforts made by certain sections of Ethiopian society in attempts to change and shape the socio-economic and political landscape of Ethiopian society? What do we know about what has happened to Ethiopians in general, whose history is said to be so rich and complex and which in the past has been wisely crafted by those who tirelessly and selflessly contributed to it? What do we know about exactly what has gone wrong with the people of Ethiopia, whose forefathers are said to have lived united within bonds of harmony, feared and respected by both friends and enemies? Indeed, as has been expressed in one of my previous articles, [Sharing the Sources of my Anxiety](#), it is not just this author who is troubled; today a good number of Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia bother themselves continuously with the same questions – about what has gone wrong with the so called “modern day” Ethiopians, whose forefathers had both the skills and capacity to negotiate and settle both internal and external differences – issues that matter so much to themselves, their country and people – and who managed to maintain the security of their people and the territorial integrity of their country for centuries? Finally, how do we evaluate the achievements, if any, the challenges and failures of the past thirty or more years of Ethiopian resistance, and come to a relatively clear conclusion, when there is little or no study material or written evaluations and reports?

Also, considering the perspectives for political and leadership change in our country, and given the increasing challenges that face the Ethiopian resistance in this post-Election period – an election held prior to restructuring and reorganization of major institutions of the people, which led to the loss of so many lives and the jailing of elected Ethiopian leaders, and which has come to be seen as the origin of persistent internal feuds and divisions among the opposition parties – does peaceful resistance have a future in Ethiopian politics? (For a more detailed discussion, see the article: *The May 2005 Election was Held without Restructuring that is Indispensable for a Free and Fair Election Process, and without Preparing the Ground for Political and Leadership Change.*) And given the persistent reluctance of Ethiopians to produce, or even to give space to, political role models with vision, do we seriously believe that the current Ethiopian opposition political parties, especially those in the Diaspora, can reorganize themselves and begin to play an effective role in an effort to galvanize the will, moods and feelings of Ethiopians and help to stimulate the re-emergence of an Ethiopian resistance, now fashioned with rationally constructed mechanisms and wisely crafted bonds of unity? Do they have the means and capacity? How come we tend to believe with such conviction that the Ethiopia resistance can be reshaped and strengthened by the Ethiopian Diaspora, becoming an organization that can succeed in bringing the desired political and leadership changes in our country, while the very foundation – the people, the members of the community – are so divided and hostile to one another, living in communities where sectarianism and parochialism are the norms, the main way that politics play out in Diaspora communities? Isn't it because of the prevailing chronic sectarianism and parochialism that a disproportionately high number of the Ethiopian Diaspora, and intellectuals in particular, remain reluctant to devote themselves to enthusiastic participation in and leadership of the Ethiopian resistance? Why is it that we are so reluctant, even allergic, to first getting our own house in order, fighting to remove the factors that divide us, democratizing our own frames of mind, developing mechanisms helpful in confidence building among ourselves, building a single, solidly founded *Ethiopian Diaspora House* that represents and reflects the entire face of the Ethiopian Diaspora and is supported with professional manpower and dependable financial capacity, before engaging in other projects that are beyond our cultural orientations and behaviours? What are the really essential actions we need to carry out – to help ourselves come back to our senses, and to be helpful to ourselves and our people at home?

Further, a good number of Ethiopians hope and expect that the entire population of Ethiopia will soon rise up against the current repressive regime in Addis Ababa. But an important question is: has there ever been a people's uprising in the history of Ethiopia/Africa? One in which a seated regime has been overthrown simply due to a people's uprising? If the people can be expected to rise up in Ethiopia, wasn't the 16th of May 2005, the day Meles Zenawi ordered the suspension of the vote counting for some weeks (presumably with the aim of snatching the election in its entirety), declared a state of emergency, banned demonstrations including any public gatherings, assumed direct command of the security forces, and replaced, the most appropriate day for a people's uprising and resistance? Why was there no uprising on this very important day?

Also, as has been observed, some compatriots often speak about armed struggle as a means of achieving their intended goals. But given the end of the Cold War, is armed struggle a feasible way to change a seated and highly militarized Ethiopian/African regime? Since the End of the Cold War, has there been an African country where a change of leadership has occurred by means of a war waged by rebel groups, especially a nation state where the majority of the people have little or no confidence in each other, where individual, family or group interests and short-term outcomes are the order of the day? If not, why then, why on earth do we think this can be achieved, especially by means of the small, unprofessional, disorganized, scattered confrontations in which we tend to engage – confrontations that cause more suffering to our people, but never scare or hurt the intended targets?

Due to the absence of standard but critically important documents – such as data on the formation and cessation of our resistance movements or political parties, lists of names including their founders, those who have been actively involved and those who have made financial contributions, the strategies employed by the leadership and the organizational structures in general, even if these were hazy – any attempt to evaluate the brief general history of the Ethiopian resistance, or even to embark on discourse about it, is an extremely difficult and indeed tricky business. It would nevertheless be important to revisit the historical conditions that

provided fertile ground for the rise of Ethiopian resistance, and to cite the cardinal foundations, and to explore at least some of the factors and actors that may have been responsible for the heavy clouds that surround the Ethiopian resistance today. The responses I will give to these complex and lengthy questions and the review of the brief history of the Ethiopian resistance, its achievements, challenges and failures, will therefore be largely based upon my own personal perspectives; day-to-day observations; practical experiences; interactions with and participation in a variety of political and social gatherings; speeches and interviews of Ethiopian political figures and historians; magazine and newspaper clippings, including press releases from Ethiopian political parties; and sporadically held discussions with actively involved Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia.

A brief Summary of the Historical Foundations of the Ethiopian Resistance

A shared desire for freedom and democracy, and an understanding of the possibilities, has not yet developed among many of the people of Ethiopia, or even among those who believe in the need for political and leadership change. However, for over three decades now a good number of Ethiopians have been making every possible effort towards political and leadership change and, at least ideally, encouraging democracy to take root in our country and giving the people an opportunity to test and share its fruits. The observed interest in freedom and democracy is despite the relative political stability that existed soon after the Second World War, and despite the love and respect Ethiopians had for each other, and the confidence they had in themselves. It is additionally true that remarkably healthy socio economic relations and political ties with both the East and West Block countries marked the three decades preceding the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. As various experts in Africa's political history have often stated, Ethiopia, as a founding member of the League of Nations –now the United Nations – has played an active, substantial role in settling political crisis among and within nation states, and in searching for world peace. According to the historical evidence, Ethiopia's role and contribution to the process of African decolonization of countries alone has been huge. Indeed, Ethiopia was a center for training and meetings among African freedom fighters and liberators. Throughout the tense and bitter period of struggle to free Africa from the shackles of European colonialism that commenced soon after the Second World War, Ethiopia, the only country in the entire continent with centuries of independence and self rule, was an indispensable house of shelter for world diplomats and negotiators when interchanges were being held between the newly emerging African leaders and representatives of European powers.

Due to Ethiopia's contribution to global peacemaking and its substantial role in the process of decolonizing African nations as they became independent of the European major powers of the time, Britain and France, Ethiopia and Ethiopians enjoyed the unlimited love and respect of the international community; there was little or no need of visas for Ethiopians to travel to certain European and Middle Eastern countries. Famine in Ethiopia was just a periodic event, a matter of national concern and a collective responsibility of its people. In addition, the number of Ethiopians living in exile numbered only in tens, not in the millions that are undeniably the reality today. The terms "asylum," "refugee" and "exile" were known only to a few well educated, politically oriented intellectual Ethiopians whose frame of mind was affected by ideas, ideologies and goals related to political, economic and leadership change for Ethiopia. Today, however, these words are well known even to rural Ethiopian children and rural Ethiopian grandmothers and grandfathers, since these phenomena have become indispensable as ways to escape repression, poverty and disease.

Despite the relative economic and political stability that followed the end of the Second World War, the profound confidence Ethiopians had in themselves, and the love and respect of all African countries as well as the international community at large that were being enjoyed by Ethiopia and Ethiopians, the needs and demands of Ethiopian urban populations for political and leadership transition began to manifest itself as early as the 1950s. The December 1960 military coup d'état launched by the Officers of the Imperial Guard, led by their Commander, Lt. General Mengistu Newaye, and his brother, Girmame Newaye, was an example. Although the attempted coup, nostalgically remembered and referred to as the "December 1960 coup d'état," was quickly put down by forces loyal to Emperor Haile Selassie, it left a residue that continued to smoulder in the minds and hearts of certain sections of Ethiopian society, becoming an additional contributor to the eventual collapse of the Emperor Haile Selassie's government and the foundation of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution.

A retrospective understanding of the factors contributing to the astonishing disintegration of the government of Emperor Haile Selassie would help us to place our situation today in a historical context. However, apart from some immediate family members of the Emperor and those who were fortunate enough to attend the final parliamentary session held on February 27 or 28, 1974 (no exact date of resignation is known), almost no one – probably 99 percent or more of all Ethiopians – knows the exact reasons behind the resignation of Prime Minister Aklilu Habte-Wold’s cabinet. Yet it is this resignation that helped to embolden the members of the Military Committee and their supporters to make further demands and foment actions that led to the subsequent structural crisis within Ethiopian society. Further, as there had never been widespread demands by Ethiopians for an immediate end to Haile Selassie’s regime, the often-heard assumption that the removal of the aging and internationally respected Emperor from power was due to a dramatic uprising of Ethiopians is unfounded. “The political tensions and crises that existed from January to the very day of Aklilu Habte-Wold’s cabinet resignation were nothing compared to the persistent and quite explosive political challenges, combined with armed confrontations – often with deadly results – that have faced and tested the unelected leadership of the TPLF since its arrival in May 1991.” (Maru Gubena, 8 July 2006.)

In logical terms, one would argue that the downfall of Haile Selassie’s government was due to a combination of known and unknown factors; his age too may have made it difficult to deal adequately with the immediate causes, such as the new education policy (known as the “Sector Review”), the 1973-74 drought in Wollo province and the international oil crisis, which affected some sections of the Ethiopian Economy. The other factor that has been cited as an important element was the complete miscalculation (or ignorance) by the Ethiopian’s as a whole about the impact of the crisis itself. Had the Emperor knew that time was working against his government, himself, his family and his people, he would probably have acted vigorously in taking the required measures, for which he still had the power and tools, the support, love and respect both inside Ethiopia and internationally. As this was the first such experience in the history of the country, no one – the former Ministers, other government officials, the Emperor himself or Ethiopians at large – expected that the crisis would move so rapidly or go as far as we have witnessed. Nevertheless, it is believed that the Emperor was repeatedly requested, even implored by his generals and immediate family members to take measures to avert the disintegration of his government and the subsequent long-term crisis for the country. But for reasons unknown, and which we probably will never know, he did nothing. As a result, and despite the ardent desire of the people for a democratic system and democratically elected leadership, power was hijacked by resentful, untrained and inexperienced military officers who had neither the vision nor the personal charisma to lead a nation state.

Restrictive political conditions were in place before the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie, and these deteriorated exceptionally in the period that followed, the ruthless regime of the Dergue. Organizational and strategic errors made by the then opposition groups and other unexplainable factors exacerbated these conditions. As a result, the people’s resistance under the leadership of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), upon which Ethiopians had firmly laid their hopes and expectations for peaceful political and leadership transition, for a future process of democratization for their country, and for the development of free and democratic institutions, did not last long as a leader of the people’s struggle. The lifespan of EPRP and its meaningful role in Ethiopian politics – and in working towards the dreams of Ethiopians – was short-lived, not only because of the deadly divisions and hostilities between EPRP and MEISON (the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement) – a collaborator with the Dergue, but also due to the lack of multifaceted skills among the young EPRP leadership, who were not experienced in crafting viable, durable political and organizational strategies, including well-thought out tactics for armed resistance. The exceptionally restrictive political and security conditions probably made it impossible for the young EPRP leadership to involve individuals who were highly experienced in the necessary organizational and political fields, and to explore, discuss and debate relevant issues in relative freedom. If that had been possible, workable, durable military strategies and political programmes might have been produced. Instead, every meeting that was attempted had to take place in complete secrecy and often in darkness, in private houses or in the rooms of individual activists, and could only involve those prepared to risk their lives and their families. The military and trained manpower capacity of the “urban military wing” that had been organized to provide immediate, direct protection to individual activists, the leadership of EPRP and its meeting places was far too limited to directly or indirectly challenge the

actions or the consequences of the actions of the Dergue, or to confront its complex military power. Given these two problems, it seems likely that the strategies constructed to resist MEISON and the Dergue regime on two fronts – urban and rural – were not well thought out and coordinated. Moreover, the underground urban operations being carried out by EPRP urban units in the major and medium-sized cities of Ethiopia had direct and immediate repercussions on its rural forces and on the leadership of the EPRP as a whole; these had not been foreseen before the urban military activities began. I would also insist on arguing that it was the urban confrontation that enabled the Dergue regime not only to locate and eradicate those EPRP urban unit activists, members of the *Urban Defence Committee*, the founders or organizers of the urban units, and anyone associated with them, but also, by using information gained from those the regime held and tortured inhumanly and horrendously, the Dergue was able to hunt down and eliminate the top EPRP leadership throughout the rest of Ethiopia.

A good number of Ethiopians who were involved in the resistance, or even those who are simply concerned about the short lifespan of EPRP, will probably continue to be bothered and to ask themselves questions. For example: how did rebel groups such as the EPLF and TPLF survive the heavy-handed measures undertaken by the regime of Mengistu Hailemariam against those opposed to his rule, and eventually succeed in deposing his entire regime, while the EPRP – whose resistance had been embraced by the majority of politically active Ethiopians – did not succeed even in prolonging its struggle? The explanation given above, strategic errors such as the “war on two fronts,” is one logical reason; this contributed to the rapid weakening in the position of the organization. Above all else, however, it was the adoption or incorporation of the political programme of the EPRP – land reform and the establishment of a socialist Ethiopia by the military regime into its own political and economic policy programmes – that created insurmountable internal feuds and conflicts between EPRP activists and its political and military leadership, and was responsible for accelerating the untimely disintegration of the EPRP as a political organization.

Consequently, less than three years after snatching away the people’s struggle for political and leadership change, the Dergue applied its ruthless measures to annihilate its opposition, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), its supporters and anyone suspected of being a sympathizer. This heavy handed, cruel and divisive nature of the Dergue regime dashed the hopes and expectations Ethiopians once had for their themselves and their country; even today their long-standing pride, and the confidence they had in themselves and in each other, remains difficult to restore. Consequently, both the country and the people have remained undemocratic and divided. Ever since the time of the Dergue it has been difficult to achieve the reorganization that would allow the establishment of an effective and transparent political process – one that functions democratically and with integrity – that is supported by a good number of Ethiopians, and to see this take root in Ethiopian society. For the same reasons, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak of the existence of a democratically organized and professionally functioning Ethiopian resistance since the end of 1970s. The only visible resistance that faced the military regime came from the two rebel groups, the TPLF and EPLF; even though undemocratic, they eventually managed to oust the dictatorial regime of Mengistu Hailemariam in May 1991.

Even given this history and the short period of time that Kinijit had been in existence – and although many technical arrangements among the parties making up the Kinijit coalition had not been worked out before it participated in the May 2005 parliamentary election – many Ethiopians saw Kinijit as a first in the history of Ethiopia: a political party that was relatively democratic, professionally organized, and showed many other hopeful signs, including a highly talented and experienced leadership (See [The Changing Face of Kinijit](#).) This is not to deny the many sincere attempts that have been made by other individuals to establish and lead political parties. I am simply saying that factors related to the culturally framed attitudes, behaviours and visions of those who have established opposition political parties have limited or entirely blocked the possible roles and contributions – which otherwise could have been immeasurably important – of potentially resourceful, knowledgeable and intellectually skilled Ethiopians with many-sided organizational and leadership experience and talents. Instead these political groupings remained remote. Not only were they far from their intended target groups, but also they were less than visible to the society. Part of the problem has been the limited or non-existent possibilities for openness within the organizational structures and policy designs in any of the political parties, whether their aims were narrow or broad; this also depends largely upon the visions and desires, including the democratic or undemocratic

attitudes and behaviours, of the founding individuals or leaders and the ways their policies are framed. It is also worthwhile to point out that the spontaneous rise and sudden fall – even disappearance – of a substantial number of these ineffective Ethiopian opposition parties has been due not only to culturally linked elements such as rigidity, arrogance and self-centeredness; other factors have been a lack of involvement, interest and understanding, a limited knowledge of the fundamentals of political and organizational principles and the need for modern organizational structures in political parties, including the components and mechanisms that are required if political parties are to gain ground and become widespread, with permanent acceptance by and support from the target groups and societies.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, one would not be wrong to argue that the fruits of the Ethiopian resistance tasted by a large majority of Ethiopians over the past three or more decades have been bitter. Ethiopians have also been and still are forced to face concurrent tragedies. And, since the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, the face of Ethiopia's political and economic maps – including the many components that have shaped the new Ethiopian culture and molded the attitudes and behaviours of Ethiopians – have changed dramatically, and in a fashion that has persisted and become difficult either to redirect or to redress. The decades following those periods also saw the beginning of deterioration in the respect outsiders once had for Ethiopia and Ethiopians, to the point where Ethiopians are no longer welcome at ports of entry for a good number of nations that have built rational, solid economic structures and relatively reliable political stability.

Looking at the perspective for political and leadership change in our country, I would certainly not hesitate to point out that the ball has been and is still in our hands, in the hands of all Ethiopians; there is still the potential for us to make up our minds and come together in an effort to heal our deep-seated socio-political fractures and help redirect Ethiopia's current position both in Ethiopia and within the international community. This seems, at least to me, a question of waiting to see what we want; whether we will be willing to come back to our senses and be prepared to restore, not just our feelings of Ethiopianess and belonging to one another, but also the shattered components of Ethiopia's culture and the pride of its people. Again, it is my strong conviction that if we, collectively, are to play a meaningful role in helping to clear away the huge clouds surrounding our country and people, to create mechanisms conducive to moving our country from the status of a beggar society to one of self-reliance, this role will be conditioned by, and perhaps depend largely upon, our willingness to fight against the bad and ugly sides of our own culture – but also upon our readiness to engage in the cultivation and development of democratic institutions, confidence building, self-education and self-democratization efforts.

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- The title and text above provide a brief summary of a larger academic research project and was produced in mid summer 2007, when both the actual climate in the western world and the political temperature within the Ethiopian Diaspora community were too hot, either to engage in the much desired work or to interact positively and freely with our politically active Diaspora compatriots. Consequently, even though the issues discussed in this article are educational and highly relevant to the current issues and discussions, it was not widely published when it was originally written and did not receive the attention the article deserves. Now, as more opportunities seem to have been created, I feel fortunate to be able to once again present this summary to my readers.