

Human Rights Violations in Polarized Ethiopia: time for a shift in paradigm of thinking

Part II of presentation at the Shengo Forum, Washington, DC,
November 30, 2014

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For members and supporters of the TPLF/EPRDF within and outside Ethiopia, and equally for the donor and diplomatic community that continues to shore-up one of the most repressive and oppressive governments on the planet, the last two weeks must have sent shivers. UNCTAD disclosed that Ethiopia's famed growth that I had disputed in terms of social efficacy, has not changed the fundamentals impediments that would lift millions from abject poverty and destitution. The vast majority of Ethiopians including the hardworking middle class are poor and getting poorer; and the poorest of the poor are trapped in a cycle of destitution. This condition emanated directly from poor and exclusionary governance and a regulatory framework that is not pro-poor and pro-Ethiopian. The condition of food insecurity and dependency on food aid says it all. Experts tell us that Ethiopia is the first country in Africa that pioneered settled agriculture and food production. In ancient times, this was considered a technological breakthrough. There is no innovation, change and technological advancement without food. But this noble tradition has been stalled by lack of empowering policies and technological inputs that would boost smallholder food and other related productivity. Unlike countries such as India where the government and the donor community revolutionized agriculture, the Ethiopian government controls the peasantry and owns the land. Smallholders and farmlands are hostages to single party and ethnic elite monopoly.

The past two weeks after our forum on human rights on November 30, 2014 showed four events that suggest the urgent needs for radical political, social and economic reforms and the vital role of solidarity in Ethiopia. The only way that these reforms in politics, social systems and economics can occur is if millions of Ethiopians rise up in unison and claim their rights. It critical to note, despite enormous hurdles, opposition leaders, members and supporters are showing fierce and genuine determination to bring the TPLF/EPRDF to the conference

table. **Recurring protests are most likely to make the country ungovernable.**

They must occur without let up and peacefully. Those of us who live in the Diaspora and wish for a better alternative must welcome this determination and persistence. Those in the forefront of the peaceful struggle for justice, the rule of law, genuine equality and representative governance must be admired. They are today's agents of change. The Diaspora must support them in earnest. We have a responsibility to do our part by approaching and urging the donor and diplomatic community to reconsider its stand. We must persuade these groups and more important skeptical Ethiopians the struggle for good governance is theirs too. The pains must be shared by all stakeholders.

Reality on the ground shows the ruling party is as determined to hold on to power through suppression as it has ever been; may be worse. The current condition of life under the Surveillance State is unsustainable and unbearable. Back to emerging trends.

First is the continued assault on the political opposition whose "crime" is the use of Constitutional rights to protest peacefully. The Anti-Terrorism and CSO laws are used to suppress dissent rather than to make the society safe against extremist forces. Most Ethiopians reject extremism. During the latest peaceful protest, more than 200 people were chased and many of them beaten, maimed, arrested and jailed in a single sweep, many are still in jail. The whereabouts of numerous people is unknown. Most of those arrested and jailed are young people including females. This in itself makes a mockery of the 2015 election and reconfirms the illegitimacy of the current governing party. At the same time, it is heartening to see courage and determination in the midst of repression. The level of peaceful resistance is deeper and more recurrent than it has been for some time.

However, what we can conclude is that **the TPLF has perfected, formalized and institutionalized its vision and programs to stay in power perpetually using the state and Ethiopia's national resources freely and liberally and deploying any means necessary, especially instruments and tools of repression and oppression at a scope unprecedented in Ethiopia's long history.** Equally important is the rise of a young generation of activists and leaders who are defying the odds and expanding the struggle for change. I commend these Ethiopians. Change is

possible if more and more young people participate. After all, the future belongs to them.

Sadly, the donor and diplomatic community is in collusion with the repressive and oppressive state. Its interests override human rights and the rule of law. If this community has a moral compass that guides it, it no longer has an ounce of excuse left but to show a determination by saying “enough to oppression and repression” and by siding with the millions whose voices are literally shut. Donors must stop pretending that Ethiopian society is better because they provide aid and perpetuate dependency. Unlike the World Bank and the IMF, UNCTAD was bold enough to inform the world that the Ethiopian developmental state has failed; and with it foreign aid. This leads me to the second unexpected development on which we have written with no one listening. Intellectual legitimacy and acceptability are still bestowed on foreign experts and institutions rather than Ethiopian and African stakeholders. The best example of this is the second scramble for African natural resources and markets without Africans playing a part.

Second, UNCTAD identified Ethiopia among 48 nations around the globe whose growth shows policy and structural deficits that can't be cured without radical reforms. Income inequality is among the sharpest and most noticeable in the world. Per capita income is less than \$500 per year, a third of the African average. Ethiopian youth continue to leave the country in droves, many dying from sea unworthy vessels and human trafficking. Ethiopia is still food aid dependent. For the first time in 24 years, the TPLF admitted its failures in mismanaging the country's natural resources, aid, remittances and the economy. Ethiopia is debt-ridden. This admission has not prompted the TPLF core to allow political space and competition that would offer Ethiopians policy options. The situation for political and social reform is as bleak as it has ever been. This is the reason why I argue that the ruling party must be persuaded to negotiate shared political power that would lead to free and fair elections. Ethiopia's very existence depends on political wisdom and maturity on everyone's part.

Accordingly, the donor and diplomatic community has a strong ammunition and incentive to demand good governance and an empowering regulatory framework that will enable Ethiopians to own assets, succeed, produce and become self-

reliant. It is in its own self-interest in the long-run. Donors and the diplomatic community should know this. For all practical purposes, development, humanitarian and security aid has failed to free Ethiopian society and lift millions from abject poverty and destitution. As Korea, China and others have shown, aid is effective when used by caring and nationalist governments and not by elites that use political power to enrich themselves. Ethnic elites have become millionaires at the cost of millions they claim to represent. As I have argued using measurements and data in the past, the Ethiopian developmental state is a rent seeking state. It cares least for those who are poor and are marginalized. It will continue to inflict pain on millions because it is committed to self-perpetuation at the cost of human freedom and rights. When elites become wealthy by controlling state power, the tendency is to maintain the status quo regardless of social and economic pains for millions. They are afraid of change and reform. This is why they sink into a militarized or garrison mentality. Foreign corporations are making profits and operate in collusion with Ethiopian beneficiaries. They will continue to justify the Surveillance state as long as they make profits.

In light of this mutuality of benefits, those who desire change should not underestimate the fact that the TPLF core has created allies and supporters that have also made it in the new system and gained millions at the cost of millions of Ethiopians. Many in the Diaspora have been enticed by temporary gains in the forms of building apartments, villas, buildings and other assets. There is no assurance that these assets would remain safe if the country falls apart and if the unthinkable of genocide takes place. In any case, it is hard for many foreign and domestic observers to accept the notion those in the Diaspora are making it harder for those in the country to compete in leasing lands and building homes. They simply do not have the income and political clout to compete in their home country.

Third, Human Rights Watch and the Oakland Institute released studies and videos that show massive dispossession, dislocation and disempowerment of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians in Gambella, the Omo Valley and other locations. Donors, including the World Bank are part of the problem; they finance so called new forms of villagization schemes. Remember, donors including the World Bank are part of global capital and serve the interests of their shareholders first. Nevertheless, we should remind them persistently and boldly that dispossession

and dislocation is a recipe for instability and civil conflict. In the event of civil conflict and Balkanization of Ethiopia, investors would lose too. The smartest thing to do is to avert this by insisting on **shared political power that would lead to free and fair elections and the establishment of a representative government.**

I should like to persuade the reader that Ethiopia no longer belongs to Ethiopians. Ownership of natural resources and real capital is being transferred from citizens to foreigners and the few elites who collude with them. In effect, natural in the form of lands and waters, and real assets in the form of manufacturing plants, minerals and others now belong to a narrow band of ethnic elites, foreign investors, donors and Western governments, emerging economies such as China and India and Arab states. The United States is a key player in all of this because it supports the security, intelligence and defense infrastructure. See my earlier commentary on President Obama.

In brief, these occurrences and others are a recipe for future disasters **including the dismemberment of Ethiopia and the potential for ethnic-based genocide. I should like to flag two convergent developments that make the current condition unique in Ethiopia's long history. The major factor is foreign influence. It has become pervasive and rooted since the TPLF/EPRDF took power in 19991.**

Whether we accept or not, Ethiopians face two major hurdles: one from the single party state that is determined to stay in power at any cost; and second, from the global community, especially donors, investors and governments that have a vested interest in prolonging and supporting the status quo. This collusion in interests makes the struggle for justice, the rule of law and democratization much more difficult than we realize. Unless---as I have suggested repeatedly---we overcome minor differences to serve the greater common good and create solidarity now and not tomorrow, Ethiopian society will remain largely poor and the country largely backward for decades. At the same time, I am convinced that this took can be reversed. It takes courage, sacrifice, solidarity and a unity of purpose among Ethiopians to reverse it.

Fourth, the TPLF signed a security agreement with its coveted friend and ally, North Sudan and the repressive regime that has massacred millions of "Black Africans." Why this agreement at this time?

The only plausible answer is to ensure that Ethiopian opposition groups do not have a safe access to overthrow the TPLF. Ethiopians are fully cognizant that the TPLF ceded vast tracts of fertile lands, water resources, potential minerals and other resources to the Sudanese government. This transfer was done at an enormous cost to the Ethiopian people, especially to the hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians whose ancestors had defended the ceded lands for hundreds of years. The security agreement won't avert future conflicts for which the TPLF is accountable. In this regard, I should like to record the phenomenal work the Ethiopian Borders Affairs Committee has carried out over the past 8 years. It is among the few Ethiopian-Diaspora organizations that has remained intact and exposed the illegitimacy of land transfers to the Bashir's Government.

Hopeful indicators

Despite recurrent onslaught on dissent, and especially on the political opposition, Ethiopia continues to produce a new generation of courageous and bold nationally oriented political parties and individuals. **The recent surge in peaceful protests is indicative of an unstoppable wave of popular resentment and defiance of the Surveillance State.** Those of us in the so-called Diaspora who wish to contribute to this surge are obliged to support the opposition consistently and deliberately. The opposition is doing the right thing by defying the repressive government and state regardless of the costs involved. Its demand the TPLF/EPRDF respect its own Constitution and international law is unassailable. My argument in this speech is along the same line.

The choice is more repression and agony that will lead to further polarization and instability. Or flexibility on the part of the TPLF to agree on the formation of an all-inclusive Transitional Government that will lead to genuine free and fair election and the formation of a representative form of government. The TPLF won't budge unless the opposition persists and unless those of us in the Diaspora unity our efforts. For negotiation to occur, the TPLF and the donor and diplomatic community need to be persuaded that the country will remain ungovernable. Ethiopia's youth have no other choice but to make their voices heard by siding with the opposition, especially with those that are committed to peaceful and sustainable change. Ethiopia's deserve their own form of "Arab Spring" or better yet, another Yekatit. No one will do it for us.

The TPLF/EPRDF has no respect for human rights laws or human dignity

I accept the notion that the world today is characterized more by the rule of law and by representative governments than by dictatorships that manifest the rule of the mighty and their swords. In this regard, history is on the side of the opposition and not with the governing party. Article 2 of **the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights** fits in the former category. Regardless of repression, people who are not free from dictatorship will normalize and institutionalize these rights through persistent struggle for change.

“Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs...” Accordingly, Ethiopians have the right to protest and advocate for the form of government that would serve them better. Many are showing their determination by sacrificing their lives and the wellbeing of their families.

Equally, sustainable and equitable development is a human right in the same way as freedom of expression, movement, association and assembly. HR Watch put it right. “Sustainable and equitable development is possible only where human rights of all individuals, particularly young women and girls are respected, protected, promoted and fulfilled.” Impacts in growth should not measure just villas, hotels, eating places, roads, bridges and the wealth of a few millionaires whose fortunes are directly associated with the rent-seeking elite. Inclusive growth must measure wellbeing. This can’t happen without independent institutions and a robust and competitive private sector governed by the rule of law. I have always felt strongly and argued that rule of law based institutions determine good governance, justice, genuine equality among people, equitable distribution of wealth and incomes, long term peace and stability in any country. Ethiopia is no exception.

Institutional mechanism

The world accepted the Universal Declaration as guide for states to respect and apply; and established an institutional mechanism to do it. It is called the UN Human Rights Council. In 2007, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon put it this way:

"All victims of human rights abuses should be able to look to the Human Rights Council as a forum and a springboard for action." In November 2014, he also related economic and social justice to human rights as follows:

"We have a vision of a just world where resources are optimized for the good of the people. Inclusive and sustainable development can derive success." UNCTAD confirmed that inclusive development is not taking roots in Ethiopia. Inequality is.

These statements from the UN Secretary General are wonderful if they would be translated into action. I am afraid that the world talks and releases statements more than actions that bite and change an entrenched and self-serving system. Ethiopians should know this better than most. During the Second World War, the League of Nations condemned fascist aggression but did nothing to prevent Mussolini and his gang from pulverizing Ethiopian towns, cities, churches and other national institutions and from massacring a generation of Ethiopia's most educated and modernizing elites. It took Ethiopia decades to recover from the carnage. While it will be farfetched to compare the current situation with this historical fact, the trend in the country shows a dire political and social condition driven by an Apartheid like government that excludes and plunders. The vast majority of Ethiopians do not own a piece of their country's natural resources and other wealth. Dispossession is real and will have a multigenerational impact.

With regard to the donor and diplomatic community; what matters is not their statements but deeds on the ground. Building bridges and other infrastructure is now used as a default line to defend the Ethiopian government. "It is growing the economy at a fast rate," they say. What about inclusion? What about fair distribution of income? I do not deny that roads and other infrastructure have been built. They are important. But what about improvements in the lives of the vast majority of the population? What about jobs? What about food security? What about ownership of real property? What about freedom and rights? What about participation in policy and decision making? What about accountable governance? What about bribery? Cronyism? Corruption and massive illicit outflow? What about the plight of indigenous people? What about ethnic cleansing?

My argument here is that there won't be peace, stability, sustainable and equitable development without rights. Don't you think so?