

The Neglected Voice of the Ethiopian Diaspora: Can the Spirits, Courage and Honesty of Birtukan, Tsegaye, Teddy and Others Revive Our Wounded Feelings and Mood of Resistance, and become Forces of Unity?

By Maru Gubena

As Ethiopians in Ethiopia are neither allowed to demonstrate nor to make their voices heard by any other means, the Ethiopian Diaspora community scattered across the world, including Tasmania, New Caledonia and Gavdos, has been making every possible effort to represent the voice of the voiceless. Tragically, depressingly, embarrassingly, however, and quite contrary to the voice and respect our parents and grandparents had, our voice, as the Ethiopian Diaspora community, has been neglected for decades now, by almost all ministries and diplomatic communities of western countries and even those in Africa.

Yes, indeed! As far as I can recall, in the nostalgic years of my childhood and youth in the 1960s and the early 1970s Ethiopia and Ethiopians enjoyed both the unlimited love and respect of the entire international community; there was 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. It is additionally true that the number of Ethiopians living in exile numbered only in tens, not in millions, as is undeniably the reality today. The terms "asylum," "refugee" and "exile" were known to only a few well educated, politically oriented intellectual Ethiopians whose state 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, grandmothers and grandfathers, since these phenomena have become indispensable as ways to escape poverty and disease, as well as internal and external wars and conflicts. Indeed, due to the structural and indiscriminately repressive nature of successive military regimes and dictators with respect to their own able and productive labour force, and the persistent character of Ethiopia's wars, internal tensions and conflicts, compounded by hunger and famine, the influence of belief in a political ideology that goes against the political and economic policy of the leadership in power has become irrelevant to determining who becomes a "refugee."

It might even not be wrong for any native Ethiopian or foreign historian to insist on arguing that since the mid 1970s the face of Ethiopia's political and economic map, including the many components that have shaped the new Ethiopian culture and molded the attitudes of Ethiopians, have changed dramatically, and in a fashion that has become difficult either to redirect or to correct. It was probably also in the time following those periods that the respect outsiders once had for Ethiopia and Ethiopians began to evaporate, to the point where Ethiopians are no longer welcome at the ports of entry of a good number of nations that have rational, solidly built economic structures and relatively reliable political stability.

What is most shocking and depressing in recent times is that Ethiopians today, even these who have already lived in foreign countries for three or four decades, have come to be looked down upon. Our country is associated with negative images – war, political repression, human rights violations and famine, and the deadly disease "HIV/AIDS," to the point that this disease is likely to become an important issue with respect to western countries' visa requirements for Ethiopians and other Africans wishing to enter for example Europe or the United States. While Ethiopians are treated with contempt, looked down upon by nations disproportionately and uninterruptedly enjoying the fruits of the end of the Cold War, and seen not only as lazy and ignorant but also as incapable of living together and dependent upon handouts from outsiders, many my of compatriots are persistently

making all possible efforts to convince the world of their right to regain the respect and dignity that have been lost. They are doing this based not upon their own achievements, or their respect and their concern for each other, but simply on the basis of Ethiopia's history, which was carefully and wisely shaped by our parents, and of the nationalistic and patriotic attitudes that helped them not only to form and maintain a united and independent Ethiopia, but also to be feared and respected by the neighbouring French and British enemy European colonial powers of the time.

Even worse, due to our own continuing actions and dishonest behaviours, we, the members of the Ethiopian Diaspora, have in recent time been repeatedly and continuously accused and charged as “liars and economic refugees.” Yes, almost all western immigration offices and ministries have hard evidence that a good number, if not the majority, of Ethiopian Diaspora members have stated in their applications for asylum that they have been tortured and would be either immediately killed or imprisoned by the authorities in their country of origin if they were forced to return – yet after receiving their living permits from western immigration authorities, they return to Ethiopia of their own accord, using temporary travel documents. Because such temporary travel documents from western cities require a visa from the visa section of an Ethiopian embassy in a western country, many members of the Ethiopia Diaspora have been registered by embassies representing the Meles Zenawi regime. In addition to IDs or passports from western nations, a number of our community members also hold Ethiopian IDs, driving licences and passports, making it easy for the unelected regime of Meles Zenawi to present, vigorously argue and win its case in any western diplomatic community debate or demand. Yes, the Meles regime has hard evidence, an endlessly long list of names; not just those with Ethiopian IDs and passports are included, but also an incalculable number of names of our community members who own private houses, small or large businesses, and urban or rural lands. Consequently (and perhaps rightly in most cases), in recent times the Meles regime has denied the existence of political asylum seekers/refugees in western countries – exactly in the same way that it insists on denying the existence of political prisoners in Ethiopia. When a diplomat from a western country confidently shows up in Meles Zenawi’s office with an intention to talk about the large number of Ethiopians who have been provided refugee status in his or her country, the office of Meles Zenawi is well prepared, and presents its own long lists with many names that are exactly the same. But one list is of “Ethiopians residing in the western world as political refugees,” while the other includes “people in search of a better life.” And in the comparison, by presenting the names of all Ethiopians with Ethiopian IDs, Ethiopian driving licences, Ethiopian passports and business ownership, the cadres of Meles Zenawi come out as the clear winner.

The direct and indirect results of our actions, our dishonest and greedy behaviours and our divisions, have made us a community that deserves not to be listened but one to be neglected and ignored by almost all western ministries, their diplomatic communities and people in general. Simply because we are fond of “going it alone,” and are accused of being “good liars” and economic refugees.” Such actions and behaviours have undoubtedly been responsible for the fruitless outcomes of our scattered efforts to gain the release of our innocent compatriots who have been unlawfully imprisoned, who languish in known and unknown cruel and inhuman Woyane prison systems.

Now we must decide if we will continue this pattern. The incarceration of Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, an innocent young woman, a mother, a humanist, a judge, a lawyer and a political and human rights activist; the kidnapping and secret solitary confinement of the well-known poet and devoted Ethiopian educator, Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, or “Debteraw;” the unlawful and lengthy imprisonment of Abera Yemane Yemane-Ab and the affectionate musician, Thewodros Kassahun, known by his loving compatriots as Teddy; and thousands of other Woyane victims who are symbols of resistance, striving for democracy and basic freedom in our country, are now at issue. These victims did nothing wrong, and many people, myself included, feel that the persistent refusal of the TPLF leadership to release them unconditionally clearly shows not only the undemocratic nature of Mr. Meles Zenawi and his followers, but also their non-Ethiopianess and the animosity they hold against Ethiopia and its people. At the same time, the willingness of Ethiopians to remain divided, keeping their heads buried

in the sand, while women and children are shot to death on the streets of Ethiopian cities and towns and opposition political leaders and artists are endlessly harassed, arrested and convicted, shows clearly that Ethiopians are most concerned with their personal and family well being, and that the winds carrying the torches of collective well being, freedom and democracy are far remote from the skies and high mountains of Ethiopia. Yes, it is we, Ethiopians of all sexes, both at home and in the Diaspora, who have allowed Meles Zenawi and his associates to urinate and defecate on our faces, backs, and even the entire bodies of all Ethiopians. It is certainly true that it is we Ethiopians who opened the door wide for Meles Zenawi and those around him to come in and engage in games of politics with Ethiopians, without first framing the conditions and without achieving the necessary arrangements. As a result, Meles can simply and easily humiliate, criminalize, charge, arrest and kill those he realizes are “true Ethiopians,” and therefore potential enemies to his ruthless rule. It is indeed a shame! Shame on all of us!

Since the sources of our infighting with each other have become so engrained and entangled, and given the extent of humiliation inflicted upon Ethiopians, I wonder when and how we will be able to recover and become willing to advance our national interest, putting the well-being of all Ethiopians before family, group or party interests and politics. I wonder how that will come about, and when! 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.

The big question for us is now: can the Spirits, Courage and Honesty of Birtukan, Tsegaye, Teddy and others, the many victims of the TPLF regime alone, revive our wounded feelings and mood of resistance and become forces of unity? Doesn't our current inactivity show our weakness and dependence on the actions and footsteps of Meles Zenawi's regime?

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