

Ethiopia's ethnic elite governance is a barrier to a promising alternative: commentary part three of ten

Aklog Birara, PhD

“Rather than fixing African lack of infrastructure, Chinese entrepreneurs and Africa's governing elites look as if they are conspiring to use the development model as a **pretext for plunder.**”

The Economist, August 13, 2011

“Ethiopia's long-awaited democratization has stalled over the last half decade. Today, there are fewer constraints on the EPRDF's power than at any other time in its 20-year rule.”

Freedom House: countries at the crossroads, 2011

Development models are never ideology and politics neutral. This is why free and fair elections matter. They give people options and choices. Because citizens have no choices, the well-entrenched minority ethnic elite have the audacity to claim that it won by 99.6 percent. This claim is possible because opposition parties are barred from competing and civil society is disabled. Ethiopian public enthusiasm during the 2005 elections was an indicator of alternatives in policies and programs offered by competing parties. It was an indicator of change. Going forward, the next election in 2015 can't just be about political parties or groups or individuals or about going through the mechanical motions of periodic and staged elections. For that, one can be sure that Ethiopian citizens will be expected to go to the polls and vote whether the process is free, fair, open, transparent and competitive or not. Just imagine one living and working in Ethiopia and not turning out to vote. One knows the consequences. The choices are limited. It is a top down

and prescriptive system characterized by fear. The public will assess the coming national election against what happened in 2005 and what new policies are offered this time.

In the aftermath of the 2005 elections, public trust and confidence in the electoral process are shattered. The democratization process has to be rebuilt from scratch. Evidence lies in the willingness and readiness of all parties, especially, officials of the ruling-party, to vow publicly and unconditionally that it will accept the rule of law and scrupulously recognize the rights of Ethiopian voters to cast their ballots in secret and without undue pressure or influence from any party. Both the ruling-party and the opposition camp must begin the healing process and restore mutual confidence and trust among the population now for this to happen. They must recognize that the election is not about the personalities who lead parties. Elections are about offering the Ethiopian people an institutional alternative to improve their lives. I predict that without public voice and participation, the current deplorable conditions in the economy will persist; and corruption will go on. This does not mean that there will not be growth.

The indicators to-date suggest that the governing party is nowhere closer to the demands of the population and opposition groups today than it was 8 years ago. It digs deeper and deeper into a garrison mentality and forces the entire society no other choice but to rebel against oppression and restore justice. Accordingly, opposition political parties and civic organizations need to get their act together now in order to lead and to avert potential chaos. The alternative they offer must be much more promising and compelling than the current governing party. In my estimation, this will not happen by chance. Offering alternatives to the public comes from an institutional process

that guarantees the Ethiopian people the right to engage in and experience the true meaning of a free, fair open, transparent and competitive election. This will be the essence of political pluralism and a departure from the tradition of leftist politics and the current ethnic elite system. To start with, opponents have an obligation to the Ethiopian people and reach-out to one another and build confidence and trust among themselves.

Cynics argue that proposing such a notion in peaceful change is naïve. The system will not allow peaceful change. They feel that the prospects are dim, because political pluralism, the evolution of democratic institutions and a level playing field in the economy will undermine single-party political and economic dominance. This, they say, the TPLF/EPRDF will never allow. This point of view has credibility. Is it really appropriate to worry whether or not the ruling party allows free and fair elections? We know that it has not and will not. What should concern us is organizational and leadership weakness within the opposition camp. For example, with a few exceptions, opposition parties are led by traditional and unimaginative political actors. The country needs a new cadre of leaders with creativity, imagination and capacity and ability to innovate and tools. The society needs political organization and leadership that places the interests of the country and its entire people ahead of party and personality.

The society needs new and insightful leaders capable and willing to bury the past (without forgetting it) and move toward a future that accommodates everyone and leaves no one. The burden of proof that officials of the ruling-party and opposition groups are not afraid of change that will come from the Ethiopian people remains to be seen. It is their ability to dare to change that will determine the future and

undo the current oppressive system. Calling the shots by using monies to buy elections and the media to propagate ideology won't change the way citizens feel deeply about the ruling-party. Borrowing heavily from the banking system and from outside to carry-out growth without participation that will change the structure of the economy will not change the lives of the vast majority and stop the hemorrhaging of Ethiopia's social capital. Once people rise to claim their future, there is no force that will stop them. We saw this in North Africa and we are witnessing it in the Middle East. This is why the opposition camp cannot afford to lag behind the needs and hopes of the population.

Political parties and leaders must believe that changes in attitude and mindset are possible. The recent change within one faction of the OLF is indicative a positive trend in the right direction. It is not enough. We all need to build on it. For example, what about Article 39 that keeps the country in permanent suspense? Some argue that ethnic politics play substantial roles in highly developed nations such as Canada and Belgium. These countries cannot be considered as peers. One cannot deny the fact that there is ethnicity and ethnic affinity of some sort. Both countries are, however, constitutional monarchies with parliamentary forms of government. First and foremost, a Canadian or Belgian accepts herself or himself as a national of the country, namely as Canadian or Belgian while enjoying cultural and linguistic freedom.

Continuing the fracturing political and social culture of blaming one another, refusing to dialogue with one another and demeaning one another will lead Ethiopian society nowhere. Perpetuating the same ideological path of ethno-nationalism and ethnic-federalism is a limiting model and strategy. Among other things, it will not advance broad-based, equitable and rapid growth and development. It lacks wisdom

and farsightedness. It has proven to be disastrous for the vast majority of the Ethiopian people. It will restrain productivity and increased incomes for millions of people.

The reader would appreciate the potent socioeconomic and political arguments which would follow in assessing the reasons and conclusions as to why ethno-nationalism and ethnic federalism are lethal for Ethiopian society. Simply put, it is a strategy of divide and rule and is intended to maintain minority ethnic elite single party dominance. This is why Freedom House concluded that the democratization process is “stalled.” In my view, it closed. It is worth going back to and tracing its history and attributes and the reasons of why Michela Wrong, who wrote a riveting fact based analysis of ethnicity and corruption in Kenya, concluded that this ethnic elite governance is “toxic.” The question that I should like to probe is the extent to which there is direct co-relation between the current “monolithic party state,” the Economist’s contention of the Ethiopian developmental state as an instrument of “plunder” and ethnic-based rule.

During the 1970s--the rise of ethno-nationalism and wars of national liberation--buffeted through diplomatic and material globalization--cost Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people dearly. The country lost its traditional access to the Red Sea. While it is not tenable to argue that it does not have some fundamental democratic features--the right to use and enjoy one’s ethnic language and culture and to demand recognition of one’s history and so on--there are numerous political, administrative management, economic and social capital formation, domestic market and investment issues that are apparent and must be addressed openly and boldly for the benefit of all Ethiopians. Let me explain them in

greater detail drawing from the experiences of other countries and insights from compatriots.

First, there is no doubt that ethnic federalism works against; and actually undermines **national level social capital formation**. The education system is deliberately narrow, parochial, shallow, and in terms of the challenges of this century, of low quality. I am not aware of a country that has achieved developed country status by adopting socialization process that is patently anti-country and anti-broad society. How in the world would Ethiopians compete in the 21st century with a human capital that is fear based, divisive and second rate? It is interesting to note that ethnic elites equip their children and others in the privileged camp through access to private schools and financing them to study overseas thus giving them the best education possible.

Second, by design the regime's ethnic based **social capital formation** does not nurture or **promote communication** across ethnic and religious lines. In fact, it reinforces separate identity, world outlook, behaviors and tendencies. If this generation of Ethiopians is barred to communicate with one another naturally and as human beings--and more important as Ethiopian citizens--is it not possible that they will be strangers to one another in their own country? How would they trust one another when they grow up if they are taught that they come from "irreconcilable ethnic and religious groups?" How would they build a modern, democratic and just multiethnic society if they are encouraged to believe in separate ethnic identities? At a basic level, how would they tolerate one another? How would they contain emotions if the system breaks down? This is the reason for my thesis that ethnic federalism keeps the society in permanent suspense and undermines solidarity across manmade ethnic boundaries.

Third, ethnic federalism **constrains the free flow of knowledge**, experience and capital, including labor, across geopolitical, religious and ethnic lines. This is exactly the opposite of trends in other countries such as Ghana. Unrestrained communication and the sharing of knowledge and best practices are vital in modernizing the country and in giving each citizen an opportunity to succeed. Ethnic federalism based location is now a major barrier to opportunity compounding the criteria of loyalty to minority ethnic elite party.

Fourth, by design, Article 39 of the Constitution reinforces secession, civil wars and permanent suspense. When people see no other option in asserting their socioeconomic and political rights, they tend to resort to extremes, including the right to secede. Is it not strange then to find that the top leadership professes nationalism and national unity whenever it wishes and whenever this advances its narrow interests; but does the opposite in creating the conditions that will make national independence, territorial integrity and the unity of the population enduring. One of these conditions is free, fair and competitive election.

Following its defeat in the electoral process in 2005, the Prime Minister had the audacity to claim that the opposition intended to trigger ethnic genocide or Intrahamwe that claimed the lives of close to 20 percent of Rwanda's population. It seems that the Prime Minister stretches facts in order to achieve an objective. The sad thing is that such a declaration is irresponsibility without accountability. The Ethiopian people have lived with one another for thousands of years. They have fought side by side and defended the country he now rules.

For the above reasons, I suggest that continuation of ethno-nationalism and ethnic-federalism as a geopolitical architecture to resolve internal

ethnic differences has in fact created unintended consequences of potentially fracturing and dismantling the fabric of Ethiopian society. The country's cohesiveness and accommodating the democratic aspirations of all its mosaic are vital for its survival, modernization and sustainability. Peace and national reconciliation will be impossible without political pluralism, justice, equitable access to opportunities, freedom and democracy for the country's mosaic. Otherwise a competitive national private sector will not emerge and endemic poverty will not be removed. This is why a new win-win formula is imperative.

A shared understanding of the benefits which would come from commonalities becomes a driving principle for debate and dialogue. If there is no consensus about commonalities, vulnerabilities will emerge and the current system will endure. Economic and social integration across geographic and ethnic lines will not take roots. Vulnerabilities would deepen implying weaknesses in mobilizing the capabilities of all Ethiopians in order to preserve the country and move it forward. It cannot move forward without social justice and political freedom. It cannot move forward without all members of Ethiopian society having fair and equitable access to opportunities. Enclaves of ethnic and localized growth that benefit ethnic elites and their supporters do not offer the panacea to technological backwardness, hunger, hopelessness, unemployment, low incomes and poverty. Inclusiveness and laying favorable conditions for shared prosperity will do marvels for Ethiopian society and will reduce the thwarting roles of globalization. Why? Ethiopians will be masters of their natural resources and will be in a better position to chart their future. Together, they will be strong.

In November 2009, I attended part of a presentation on politics, repression, instability and the political economy of reform in Sub-Saharan African countries sponsored by the World Bank. A Ghanaian Political Scientist, Dr. Emmanuel Akwetey, made a remark which I found pertinent to the Ethiopian situation. His analysis was on the paradoxical links of **democratic elections and instability**. In highly ethnically polarized societies such as Ethiopia, this danger exists for sure. But, its intensity will depend on how issues will be framed and presented to the public by contestants in the future. “By accepting the liberal democratic model that we will have cyclical instability, we have accepted **that elections should not emphasize our cohesion.**” This is the key point of my argument.

If contestants do not surface and debate fundamental issues that affect all of the Ethiopian people and instead focus on narrow, ethnic-oriented and parochial and competing interests, tensions will mushroom and instability will ensue. Akwetey put it succinctly when he said “We need systems that consider **cohesion** after the election has been won.” Losers and winners must accept outcomes as long as the election process is free, fair, open, transparent and competitive. There must be the prospect of a next time. Elections are not like coup d’états. The ruling-party and some within the opposition, treat them as such. The hard work of building institutions and the infrastructure to support democratization is lost in the process. This is why ordinary Ethiopians mistrust their government and its institutions and have low confidence in the opposition. The opposition must surmount the confidence and trust deficit by reaching out to one another now not half a century from now.

When I underscored the need for Ethiopia's social cohesiveness, I was referring to the country's sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national interests as well as to the benefits which will accrue from the sovereignty and authority of the Ethiopian people and commonalities in the economic and social system. I suggest that the solution starts by identifying and agreeing on common problems with a view of finding common solutions. These commonalities refer to the interests and needs of all citizens. One common interest they share is the need to assault endemic poverty in all of its manifestations. Another is gross human rights violations. Another is the plunder of the resources by a minority ethnic elite and global actor. Cohesiveness within the opposition camp provides them with the numerical strength to challenge the system which keeps them poor, powerless, ineffective and isolated from one another. The immense untapped treasures embedded in each and every nationality, religious, gender and demographic group suggests prevalence of potential social, cultural and economic benefits that will make the society prosperous in the long-term. It is this prospect that should lead opponents to coalesce.

I say this because of the social capital inherent in each nationality group and in each democratic leaning opposition party and civil society. It is the sum total of these potential assets or parts that make the whole formidable. Exploitation of this potential to benefit all will make the society far more prosperous than separate enclaves. For this reason, I genuinely believe in social, cultural, economic and political equity and inclusion. Innovative organizations and leaders must recognize the value added of confidence and trust building that will lead to cooperation rather than rivalry. A mentality of exclusion is costly and limiting to the democratization process and to growth and

development. Inclusion and social justice do the opposite. These capabilities can be harnessed to the fullest to the extent that all opponents are able to pull in the same direction. They cannot do this unless they trust one another; and work with one another.

Opponents need to grasp the notion that sustainable economic and equitable development comes from inclusiveness, a vibrant national private sector and access to equitable opportunities and investments. The same way that most experts urge and defend the potential benefits of opening up the political space; I would forward the notion that socioeconomic sustainability requires opening up or leveling the investment and economic space for all and each Ethiopian. Opening up the political and economic spaces are manifestations of pluralism and democracy. One reinforces the other. One can't have political democracy unless it facilitates economic and social justice for all citizens. Opponents can and should reject ethnic politics, including ethnic federalism because they are major barriers to genuine democracy that should manifest itself in one person one vote. For Ethiopian society to succeed in achieving political pluralism, free and fair elections must be national not local or ethnic-based. I will draw an economic argument to strengthen this point.

The hunger problem is not a Tigre or Amhara or Afar or Somali or Oromo problem. The unemployment problem is not a Somali or Oromo or Afar or Amhara problem. The land grab problem is not an Oromia or Gambella problem. The social and institutional de-capitalization problem is not an Afar, Somali or Amhara problem. Ethiopian national unity is not a Tigray or Oromia or Amhara problem. **It is an Ethiopian problem.** This is why I suggest that unbridled access to economic and social opportunities is the right of all Ethiopians. Without this right,

sustainable and equitable development will remain out of reach for the vast majority regardless of another five year plan with billions of dollars in investments. Why? Monopolistic and ethnic practices are, by definition, inequitable, unjust, unfair and limiting. Fair investment policies and practices trigger opportunities across geopolitical, ethnic and demographic lines. Ethnic-based policies and practices crowd out these possibilities. While there is overwhelming evidence that Tigrean elites build mansions in Mekele; it is not true that a Tigrean farmer or any other poor can expect to live in this new mansion. While he may not starve because of favorable treatment from an ethnic regime, this poor farmer cannot be identified as better off than an Amhara or Oromo or Gambella farmer and so on. We cannot afford to generalize and penalize whole ethnic groups because elites at the top dominate national politics and economics or institutions of control. I do not underestimate the symbolic importance associated with ethnic based dominance of national politics, though.

This is why I argued in the previous two articles on ethnic federalism that state capitalism—a form of crony capitalism in Ethiopia—is marvelous for a privileged few because it crowds out deserving individuals from competition. It is a source of destitution for the majority and those excluded. In 2010, Amare Mammo who worked for the Ministry of Agriculture under the TPLF and left dismayed offered a testimony concerning the gap in wellbeing between those in power and those who are disempowered. He contrasted two emerging classes in Ethiopian society today, a few largely minority ethnic rich amidst a majority poor. The prudent question to ask is how the few accessed enormous wealth over the past 21 years, while leaving the vast majority destitute and poor.

At both the political and economic levels, opening up the windows of opportunity would occur only when there is unrestricted and free public participation and engagements; and a level playing field for economic and social participation and investments. Involvement by all citizens in the political process assumes consensus concerning a unified and shared geopolitical and political space that comes from an identity with Ethiopia and Ethiopian citizenship. Ethnic identity does not nurture shared political power and shared prosperity. If there is no willingness to share political power, it is predictable that there will not be shared prosperity. Why? The political party that is in power determines policies, decisions, programs and allocation of resources. This control provides it with the means that defines who would have access and who does not; who is wealthy and eats more than three meals a day; and who is poor and has difficulty securing one meal a day. Ethnic politics is this much powerful and decisive.

It is this practical and life and death situation that compels all political and civil opponents and the rest of us to find practical ways to set aside differences and focus on commonalities and on common actions. We have overwhelming evidence that the minority ethnic elite party of the TPLF and its ethnic camouflage, the EPRDF has practically closed political, social and economic space for the vast majority. This does not mean that it has not succeeded in recruiting millions of members through economic and financial incentives. However, a mercantile approach to governing a country is not the same as gaining political legitimacy through free, fair and competitive elections. Opposition parties, civic groups, intellectuals and the rest of society can and must seize the opportunity offered by this shallow and corrupt architecture and challenge it intelligently, strategically, systematically and in a

sustainable way by **doing exactly the opposite of ethnic divide and rule.**

What do I mean by this? Set aside minor behavioral differences; do not dwell on the past; reach out to one another; build mutual confidence and trust; develop a common platform; and anchor the struggle within the country now. It is when this happens that miracles would occur; and this miracle will come from the Ethiopian people themselves. The overwhelming majority of Ethiopians are tired of being poor, repressed, disenfranchised, powerless, propertyless and voiceless. What they need is a political organization and leadership that is committed to them: **rule of law bound, genuinely democratic, bold, imaginative, inclusive, trustworthy and transformative.**

To be continued

1/25/2012

