



Emerging Truth Changing Power Balance in Ethiopia

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter... (Isaiah 5: 20)

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Ethiopia has become a land where **Truth** is the most feared and hated enemy of the TPLF/EPRDF. Regime supporters, from the top offices of Meles to the rural officials at the kebele level, have gone to great extremes of deception and injustice in order to repress truth, in any form, as well as to punish truth-tellers, by any means necessary.

Millions of birr have been spent by this authoritarian regime on countering the truth with lies, deceit, propaganda, secrecy and outright fraud. TPLF/EPRDF ambassadors of deception—distortion specialists—are sent abroad to perpetuate untruths about this regime. Services from pricey international lobbying firms are bought with foreign donor or Ethiopian taxpayer monies in order to sell a false image to the world of what is in reality a corrupt, brutal and dictatorial regime.

Any who attempt to expose the truth are at risk of harassment, intimidation, arrest, imprisonment, torture or even death. As a result, many of our most courageous, principled and outspoken Ethiopian brothers and sisters are forced to leave the country for exile. If they remain in Ethiopia, they are either forced to submit to silence or end up becoming targets of repression and injustice by the TPLF leaders and their co-conspirators of deception and injustice found in the courtrooms, ministry offices, police stations and government offices at every level and in every part of the country.

This sheds light on the arrest of Woubishet Taye, the deputy-editor of the Awramba Times on July 19th and two days later, the arrest of Reyot Alemu, from the Fetea newspaper. Seven others were arrested along with them, including Zeryihun Gebreegziabher, the chairman of the Ethiopian National Democratic Party (ENDP) and Dejene Tefera, a member of the party. All were charged under the new anti-terrorism law, which is so vague that, as intended, it can be easily used as a weapon against any whom this regime dislikes.

We in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) strongly condemn the arrests of these people and call for their immediate release, along with our other political prisoners being held under a judicial system that will someday bring judgment on itself for rewarding wrongdoers and punishing the innocent. Meles is not committing such injustice alone, but depends on a web of countless co-conspirators whose time of accountability will come. We Ethiopians cannot overlook what is happening and must stand in solidarity with these people.

Why this new crackdown if this regime is not living in fear? During the Egyptian uprising, numbers of Oromo were arrested; but over the last few months, the stories we have heard are about food prices, price caps, inflation, the lack of basic staples, the growing hunger and starvation, the lifting of price caps, the jamming of ESAT, the VOA and Deutsche Welle, the leasing of Ethiopian land, the displacement of citizens and the overall hardship of life for the majority of people while the Meles elite continue to thrive; however, now there is this crackdown on the press. U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton may even have been a target of this repression when the lights went out during her speech to the African Union in Addis Ababa last month. Was this a reaction to her unwillingness to advance the false image of Ethiopia—an image that has so distanced itself from reality that it has become an absurdity?

For example, in a June 29th article by William Davison of Bloomberg News, Davison reported a phone conversation with the State Minister of Communications, Shimeles Kemal, regarding the arrests of these two journalists, stating that their arrests “should be viewed as a strong measure by the government to protect freedom of speech,” since they are connected to alleged plots to destroy telecommunications infrastructure.” Does Shimeles Kemal really think anyone would believe this?

On the other hand, the re-invigorated TPLF/EPRDF crackdown on the people may be a sign of waning strength as exposure of the true nature of the Meles regime has reached a new point of penetration into general public knowledge. Now, **“everyone knows”** that **“everyone knows”** about how bad this regime truly is and this makes it harder to “do business” as usual with a dictatorship. *Previously, there was an “acceptable level of suspicion,” but now, the truth has become far more blatant and the substance of the cover-ups, increasingly more preposterous. Attempts by the TPLF/EPRDF to do “damage control” are failing as the “word is out” on this regime. Association with the Meles regime has become a real liability; particularly in this “post Arab-Spring” climate.*

As Meles loses credibility internationally, there are also indications that he and his regime are also losing credibility and authority within the Ethiopian military ranks. Information is being leaked regarding the growing division and strengthening power struggle going on behind the scenes in the military as disenchantment with this regime grows. According to reports (Ethiomeia), Meles has now purged the military of 747 top leaders—including 7 generals, 240 colonels and 500 senior officers—many of TPLF background. *Meles no longer has the supporters he used to have when he did the same thing back in 2001 and this action may backfire!*

Who would be surprised if this regime did not implode all on its own, even without any viable alternative in place that could help achieve a more peaceful transition? Ironically, even as Meles has closed off any space for the development of such an alternative, the vacuum created by the sudden fall of this regime could produce a far more dangerous outcome for the TPLF/EPDRF.

The TPLF/EPRDF has become like the African tree that produces inedible and poisonous fruit in such abundance that its branches will be overloaded and break. Even an entire tree, which looks strong, lush and healthy on the outside, will fall down on its own simply because the heavy burden of fruit it has produced has overloaded it beyond capacity. This may be what we are seeing with the TPLF/EPRDF regime. Their actions—deception, lies, injustice, greed, corruption, evil, brutality, robbery and destruction—have produced the poisonous fruit of hate, division, death, marginalization, hunger, suffering and anger; all of which could bring this regime down on its own!

The quavering of the tree can be seen in public places as TPLF/EPRDF propaganda specialists turn up wherever a crowd gathers to tempt outsiders to eat from the tree of inedible fruit. I met such a TPLF regime sympathizer Ato Tamrat G. Giorgis, Managing Editor of the Addis Fortune, in Germany when I recently spoke at a workshop at the Deutsche Welle Media Forum on June 21st. Prior to my workshop, we met and he gives me his business card and it says *Independent News & Media Plc on the card.*

We talked together and he claimed to be a member of the independent media. I asked him whether he really thought there was an independent media in Ethiopia and he said, “Yes, the Ethiopian Constitution created a law to protect this right which was based on the United Nations Human Rights Charter.” I told him that it did not matter how great the law was; if the law was not put into action, the law was meaningless.

He asked me, “Whatever happened to you to make you who you are?” I told him that it was the injustice done by the regime that was making me do this work. I told him that when Meles first came to power; lots of Ethiopians were thinking he might make the country better for everybody but it never happened. He responded, **“What were you expecting? This is “highlander politics!” It does not matter who comes to power; whether Amhara or Oromo! Nothing changes! This is highlander politics!”**

I told him, “We don’t need highlander politics or lowlander politics or tribal politics. What we need is the Ethiopian peoples’ politics where they are given freedom to choose who they want to lead them. That is why this cycle must be stopped! What we want is to bring lasting change and that is why I am doing what I am doing. We don’t need the tribal politics of ethnic hatred of Meles!”

Then he went on to defend Meles; asking why people in the Diaspora are so obsessed with blaming Meles; saying he was the “brightest guy” in the TPLF. He then blamed the opposition for failing to organize and be effective. I explained that Meles is the focus because he has used his cleverness to become the mastermind of this ethnic hatred and division.

In the evening, we met again and he was with another Ethiopian who then asked him, “Who is this guy?” He replied, “He’s an Ethiopian from Gambella and he’s a revolutionary!” I just smiled in response to this comment and the conversation ended.

The next day, after speaking at the workshop, Ato Tamrat challenged me during the question and answer period; saying, “*I disagree with Obang because in Ethiopia this idea that there is no freedom in the media is a lie, but I won’t focus on that, instead, I want to say that I totally disagree with Obang when he says there are displaced people because of the land lease agreements. There is no land grab problem in Ethiopia and no one has been displaced. Ethiopia is a poor country and if people want Ethiopia to improve itself, they should allow the investors to come to the country to invest.*”



My response to him was to run the video by John Vidal of the Guardian that I had already prepared to show. Please see the link for the video: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/21/ethiopia-centre-global-farmland-rush?CMP=tw_t_gu. For those who did not see it, Mr. Vidal does an excellent job of showing people living under trees after being displaced by Karuturi Global and Saudi Star. He interviews those affected; even though most were obviously afraid to speak openly. One man would only do so if his face was blurred due to fear of arrest or other punitive actions by the government.

After the video finished, I asked him, “Someone is lying, are you or is the video?” The audience was in total silence waiting for his response, but I went on.

“Those people you see are not people brought from Sudan or Kenya but are Ethiopians talking about their own government. You have seen it. Do not try to convince me about what is happening in Gambella! You might try to do so in any other region of Ethiopia, but you cannot do that in Gambella because those people you have seen are my own people and I am in communication with them. I know exactly what is going on. If you want to try to convince people, go to someone else because I know what is going on better than you do.”

I then asked him why he, as an independent journalist, claimed to be able to write anything he wanted without fear while some of the brightest journalists were living in exile; like the head of the Ethiopian Press Association or why he was able to live freely while most of the professional journalists who spoke their mind within the country were either in jail or were being intimidated and harassed? The moderator asked him if he had anything else to say and he did not try to defend his allegations.

The last comment was from a young Ethiopian student in Germany who stated, “Look, there is no freedom in this country. People are arrested. There is no political space. There are human rights abuses and Meles is selling off the land. Because of Meles’ partnership in the war on terror, he gets away with everything and the western nations are not speaking up. What is going on in Ethiopia is inconceivable!”

After the workshop, I spoke with Ato Tamrat again. He said, “*You are trying to make me hate the government.*” I responded, “No, I am not the one to make you to either hate or to love the government or the opposition. Your conscience should do that for you; telling you what is right and what is wrong.”

These conversations occurred on the same day Reyot Alemu of the Fete Newspaper was arrested and only two days after the arrest of Woubeshet Taye, from the Awramba Times, which made this man’s claims all the more ridiculous; while at the same time, it was very sad because of the lives affected by these immoral actions. There is no question that I would have faced the same fate had I made my comments inside Ethiopia.

Another newspaper called "Addis Werie (tidings)" managing director Piniel Hailu who was taken when he was leaving his office and taken to some unknown place and harassed and beaten (slapped) by security forces. They told him to shut down his paper within three months and also forced him to open his email so that they can read his emails correspondences. Finally they interrogated him about what he knows about the diaspora movement and what kind of communication he has with opposition in diaspora. When he told them that all they are doing is against the law and they need to bring a court order they slapped his with the back of their hand.

As the Meles regime conducts the War on Truth with decreasing success, the balance of power is changing. The tree of the TPLF/EPRDF has produced a harvest of undesired fruit that is straining the entire system. Collapse may come from within without any need for an uprising, but without care, it could be dangerous.

We Ethiopians should be strategizing about a concrete plan and vision for transitioning Ethiopia from "serial tribal reigns," which benefit only a few, to a healthy, well-functioning society where its entire people are valued based on their shared humanity and citizenship; putting humanity before ethnicity or any other distinctions for there is no freedom for one ethnic group until there is freedom for all.

As we look forward to that day, we want to warn any TPLF/EPRDF co-conspirators that *truth is the foundation for our future freedom, justice and peace and part of that truth is identifying those who are now instrumental in suppressing the truth, committing human rights abuses, using corrupt practices to rob the country or perpetrating injustice in the courts or government offices.*

Once this TPLF regime collapses, the people of Ethiopia will finally hold them accountable; however, even now, those TPLF/EPRDF supporters whose consciences convict them should know that there still may be a way out for those who genuinely regret any complicity with this regime.

Just like the pro-TPLF/EPRDF gentleman I met at the Deutsche Welle Media Forum, *Ethiopians of every background have accepted as the status quo the nationally-destructive model of "my tribe first," "highlander politics" or "lowlander separatism." He basically thought I was naïve for thinking that Meles would be any different when he came into power; believing that it has always been like this and that no matter who came into power, it would always result in "highlander politics!" This is the unspoken truth that everyone knows. Compliance without challenge is an expectation; yet, this is the kind of thinking that has always held back Ethiopia from moving forward to a more united, peaceful and prosperous society!*

What he did not understand is that *the SMNE was formed to eradicate this kind of thinking for no one highlander, lowlander or tribal group will be sustainably free until all are free. When we fail to uphold the rights and well being of others, we alienate our own souls and fail in our human responsibility towards others. Suffering, marginalization and conflict are the inevitable results.*

In Ethiopia, these principles of the SMNE may be revolutionary ideas, but they are the only road to revive the dying soul of our nation; dying because of the leaders of the country who are only there for the thriving of their own tribe at the expense of all other tribes.

We may call the Meles regime a terroristic government that has made Ethiopia into a prison; however, the true revolution for freedom is in our minds and hearts. The truth must challenge the status quo as never before! Examine yourselves and make your choices! We hope you will choose what is true, right, good, honorable and just!

May God help us eradicate highlander, lowlander and any tribal politics! May we be transformed by the truth!

Long live Ethiopia!

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