

Commentaries on Current and Other Issues (Year End Review)

In keeping with my tradition of presenting year-end commentaries on current and other issues, here are 15 of them.

1. Disclaimer

Several weeks ago, someone had begun impersonating me and using my name on different occasions to post comments online on EMF web site. I brought this to the attention of EMF editors and action was taken to remove my name, for which I am thankful.

2. Small is beautiful

I met a young Ethiopian who lives in Germany in Bahir Dar seeking advice from the Amhara Development Association to open a school in his village. A small initiative like this makes a difference. The issue brought up by Zeru Hagos and “Reqiq” (raising capital in the Diaspora) could also start small with someone amongst us who has a business aptitude or talent mobilizing few people. This would get replicated as information is disseminated and people learn more and more about the Ethiopian financial system and governance. Thinking to mobilize the Diaspora at once at a grand scale is not realistic and, quite frankly, previous such attempts, such as the millennium celebration initiative, did not work. The initiative has to come from within the Diaspora. The Diaspora media can play a role. A good approach would be to lower bond rates and encourage people to make monthly contributions to their portfolios. Speaking of governance, the Ethiopian government bureaucracy may create problems, since it is less sensitive to client needs. Assume that I buy a bond today and then want to sell it in six months. How quickly would I get my money back? The government should provide information on issues like these to increase confidence including general information on bonds (you would be talking to people who have not taken Economics 101), how to buy, how to cash, benefits, incentives, taxation, and so on. The EEPSCO is trying to light the Ethiopia’s countryside in order to end the isolation and poverty of rural people. I saw Indians working in Gayint-Wollo area connecting small towns and near villages with electricity grids as part of EEPSCO’s rural electrification program. We have a responsibility to support such initiatives. It is despicable that there people in the Diaspora who agitate to discourage us. Precisely also why I have been

calling for some sort of a legislation that holds such individuals and groups accountable.

3. Ethiopia's military pride restored

We can interpret the Ethiopian pull out of Somalia the way that we want. One thing clear is that Ethiopia has shown that it can use its military might to contain those vying to endanger public security in the Horn of Africa. Credit goes to EPRDF for restoring Ethiopia's proud military tradition that was destroyed when Derge was run by corrupt thugs calling themselves generals, colonels, commissars and so on.

4. Suddenly we got busy!

For months, many of the Diaspora web sites copied and pasted news headlines from international media sources. The reason was that the "analysts" (intellectual thugs) had stopped writing when the Diaspora political crowd disintegrated following the start of butchering among political groups. Then Teddy Afro was sent to jail; Birtukan Mediksa re-arrested; and the 2010 election is approaches; among other things. The "analysts" have re-emerged again producing articles and commentaries. Birtukan's cause has received more attention with some claiming to have analyzed it from legal, constitutional, philosophical, political, etc, perspectives. The fact is that in public domains, the most successful brokers are those that play damn (pretend legally or politically illiterate) and appeal to common values and sentiments to persuade people to compromise. Otherwise Birtukan, as a public figure, should have been very careful with her public statements. Our argument has been that the pardon was based on the spirit of forgiveness and, in keeping with our tradition, it is done only once. Therefore, for EPRDF, continuing to demand an acknowledgement of the pardon is totally unnecessary and re-arresting Birtukan politically stupid.

5. Brave critics of revolutionary democracy

We are pleased to see criticisms of revolutionary democracy, including one by Seye Abraha, which have enhanced our understanding of EPRDF. I myself have a practical exposure of how EPRDF worked on the ground, especially when I stayed one year in Gondar in the 1990s doing research. There were certain things that I didn't like such as EPRDF's adversarial attitude towards other entities and the authoritarian nature of local officials. But, we grew up in a society where people perished due to disease,

poverty, war and famine. Put yourself on our side and, when revolutionary democracy makes the state pro-poor (nobody has disputed this), no matter how much reservation you have about EPRDF, you would not condemn or reject its ideology, not until at least you have an alternative national ideology. You appreciate EPRDF more when you have some people in the opposition camp laughing at the poverty of your relatives or insulting you ፋራ (backward) and ከብት እረኛ (cattle herder). We learn to identify ourselves with the interest of our relatives when the Diaspora opposition camp despised foreign aid and began lobbying donors to stop aid for Ethiopia, knowing that aid was crucial for the survival of millions of poor Ethiopians. All this is not the same as saying that criticisms are bad. It is to say that criticism should go beyond historical and theoretical analyses of revolutionary democracy to focus on EPRDF's performance on poverty reduction. Backward looking and theoretical analyses are normative and most of the time they focus on middle class issues (free press, "human rights", associational life, political power, etc) and identity issues. Some of the arguments can also be misleading. For example, there are no independent newspapers in Gondar, not because EPRDF has prevented "free press", but precisely because the middle class in Gondar is too small, which means that there is low readership and newspaper business does not make money. Could EPRDF have done more in the past 17 years to move the country forward? Absolutely. Yet, if you travel across Ethiopia, you could also see the complexity of development challenges and resource requirements. We would rather see changes in EPRDF leadership by continuing to bring fresh people to the leadership circles and gradually replacing war-generation revolutionary democrats who seem to be less tolerant and quick to avenge their political opponents.

6. Congratulating the Eritrean Diaspora

Recall that Senate bill on Ethiopia? One aspect of the bill was the requirement that the United States urges Ethiopia (you may say, forces Ethiopia) "to comply with the EEBC arbitration decisions on border demarcation..." This after the spending of tens of thousands of dollars by Ethiopian vocal groups that used to condemn EPRDF for not occupying the port of Assab in 2000? Meanwhile, our Diaspora "analysts" were applauding the success in pushing the bill to the Senate floor. Meanwhile, too, Eritreans were self-congratulating themselves and perhaps saying, "aren't we glad that we fought for our independence when these thugs were on power". Yet, today many Eritreans may remember the good old days when Asmara was the second largest recipient of the Ethiopian government budget (next to Addis Ababa) and Eritrean elites were

paraded by the reactionary monarch and mahal safaris to accept attractive government appointments in order to appease them politically. Today Eritrea looks like a Middle East colony and the elites that once led comfortable lifestyles in Addis Ababa now live a miserable life under one of the most repressive regimes in the world. It has also surprised me to find out that the memory of Eritrea among Ethiopians is fading away fast, in large part because those who have taken the public stage to talk about “Eritrea” are more interested in seaports (which have been replaced by the efficient ports of Sudan and Djibouti), instead of putting a strong emphasis on historical and lineal relations (which could have sustained generational pro-Eritrea sentiments). Eritreans better learn to fend for themselves, instead of wasting their energy on Ethiopian issues, some still taking about Ethiopian “occupiers” or “enemies”.

7. The political anatomy of thugs

You might probably have watched a national geographic program on TV about wild dogs that travel in packs roaming in the African savannah. These dogs are good at working together to hunt their prey, but, once they down their prey, they fight bitterly over the share of their meal. No doubt the fighting results from the struggle by each one of them to have a faire share, but, at other times, they fight so bitterly that they exhaust their energy, making it easier for scavengers to steal their meal. And so life for wild dogs goes on. The analogy here is Ethiopian opposition politics: thugs getting together, occupying public space, monopolizing politics and then fighting each other to create anarchy. They disintegrate, re-organize and do the same thing all over again, destroying the opposition movement and creating problems for democratization. Don't forget the political scavengers (like EPRP)! Amid all this are the Provincial jeles (foot soldiers which include Phds) who do the hardest work (raising money, spreading propaganda, etc), but never have a chance to share the spoils of politics. Tecola Hagos wrote that these thugs (who controlled the Ethiopian state for almost a century) were responsible for the underdeveloped Ethiopia. Tecola would receive a barrage of denunciations and insults for speaking the truth. እንደች ነችና፤ የወሎየይቱ ልጅ። ወይ ፍንክች።

8. Is there a standard of justice in Ethiopia?

Last November (2008), the Ethiopian government “pardoned 44 ex-OLF members convicted of serious crimes” (source: ENA). Why is then EPRP prisoners not released? Have they committed more serious crimes than those ex-OLF members who might probably have massacred innocent

civilians? Or EPRDF still fears EPRP as a formidable political force (Amen, Amen, Amen!) or the release of these prisoners has no political leverage?

9. Human Rights Watch vs the Ethiopian government

Human Rights Watch and the Ethiopian government remain faced off against each other over reports of human rights abuses during the Ethiopian military operations in Somalia and Ugaden region. Human Rights Watch issues reports and the government immediately issues statements to counter them. Having lived through repression, I would find it difficult to dismiss the claims of physical and psychological abuses of civilian in war zones. My problem is that Ethiopian soldiers are descent young people who would not slash the throats of young people, mass rape women, burn down villages, and so on, as reported. If I remember correctly, one of the victims of rape gave an interview inside Kenya and perhaps anyone reporting this could have tried to take her to the nearest medical centre for an examination that would have established proof of the alleged rape. NATO army commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan are often frustrated when an incident, such as a roadside suicide bombing, is reported by the international media before they learn about it. The reason? The Taliban and Iraqi insurgents, realizing the power of international opinion, have developed sophisticated media communication systems. People working in human rights organizations are not foolish and in no way would they get manipulated. What I am saying here is that today's non-state combatants may use any means at their disposal to sway public opinion. Moreover, instead of issuing counter-statements and reports, it is better that Ethiopian government officials invite the Human Rights Watch and other international human rights organizations for dialogue on joint fact finding missions.

10. Ethiopia the fourth fastest growing economy

Bad news for the vocal Diaspora.

11. The Al Moudi-Reporter saga

As much as we sympathize with Editor Amare Aregawi, he might have lost his reputation because of his "untouchable" attitude and for unleashing a personal vendetta against Sheik Al Moudi and even insulting Gondar "Jurassic Park". The Sheik has earned our respect and admiration for his generosity and commitment to the country. His beer factory in Gondar alone has created employment and generates tax

revenues of tens of millions of birr a year for the city. Perhaps our man in Addis Ato Amare should take it easy.

12. How to keep the money in the countryside

Imagine a peasant selling 10,000 eucalyptus trees at the price of 40 birr a piece for a total income of 400,000 birr. Where is all that money going? I don't think Ethiopian government authorities are asking this question. According to the ENA, one farmer put 14,000 birr in his house and his calf ate the birr notes. Other farmers use their money to build low grade rental houses in small rural towns. How about encouraging rural investment, such as organizing farmers in groups to open local industries that produce different industrial products, such as bricks, tiles, clay roofs, furniture, textile and lumber? Does Ethiopia have heavy metal industries that make different industrial machines? Does the country have skilled people who design industrial products? The missing dimension in the successive Ethiopian national development plans is the lack of a clear vision for rural industrialization. Ethiopian government planners followed traditional economics thinking which assumes that, once the agricultural sector makes money, it would attract investment in rural industries. This is not working. The government must push industrialization to rural areas. There is a need for the creation of a national multi-disciplinary research program for industrial development.

13. The rise of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia

The rise of Pentecostalism in Ethiopia should be in part attributed to the weakness of the Orthodox Church itself. In urban areas, you have Orthodox clergies busy taxing the growing rich middle class and getting richer, compared with Pentecostal clergies who are often perceived to be descent and disciplined. The urban Orthodox clergy lost moral high ground in society. Another factor is the backwardness of the church teaching. Instead of progressing with time, the Church still preaches agitating Ethiopia's unique Christian tradition. What does this do to advance the country's development? The Pentecostals and other foreign Christian and Muslim religious groups are gaining ground because of the poverty in society. During the last (2008) harvest season, heavy rain was damaging crops. Whereas government authorities were busy finding solutions, including in some areas ordering students and government employees to help farmers, the church did nothing, not even counselling farmers to encourage them to work on monthly religious holidays. Unless there is a revival in the Orthodox church, today's tens of thousands of churches

would disappear one by one and, in our children's life time, they would just be exotic tourist destinations, for Pentecostals and others.

14. What does EPRP do these days?

EPRP-R (retired) is for Birtukan Mediksa. EPRP-D (displaced) is for Teddy Afro. No, no, no, I think I got it wrong. EPRP-R is for Teddy and EPRP-D for Birtukan. There has been a lot of confusion in the EPRP camp. They split to ended up doing this. What a political mockery!

15. ቁስ ታምራት ላይኔ

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Getachew Mequanent
Ottawa, Canada
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