

Quo Vadis Ethiopia? (Ethiopia Wodet?)

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye

PART VIII (Continued from Part VII)

VII. Why I believe... (Ethiopia not only remains united but would and should be a stronger and more prosperous country:)

As I stated earlier, the challenges we Ethiopians, as a people, face are infinitely ever more complicated, definitely huge, complex and can by no means be taken lightly. In order to change course and chart a new brighter future, Ethiopian citizens of today, both individually and collectively, have to face and overcome these challenges introspectively and with determination, boldly but purposefully, with all seriousness, full force and all the energy we have. That, obviously, will require an environment where the nation could be inspired and its people galvanized and mobilized in a systematic and willful manner. And that kind of environment can only be created through a deliberative national reconciliation process that can only be achieved if a proper transition is made possible. The simmering sense of desperation and hopelessness now permeating our society is clearly alarming, and the challenge it poses to our collective struggle to change course and start a new journey of societal revival, transformation and revitalization cannot be minimized.

We, therefore, cannot, in good conscience, contemplate a better collective future without first addressing our citizens' constant fear and uneasiness about their daily survival, the seemingly transcending feeling of hopelessness, desperation and self-doubt, lack of trust on political leaders and their overwhelming burden of grave concerns about an uncertain future. Priority should, therefore, be given to lifting those pervasive feelings of despondency and hopelessness from our people's shoulders. Reviving their self-confidence, restoring their self-pride in being Ethiopian and resuscitating their sense of self-worth, instilling and giving them a renewed hope for a better future ought to be the national calling of all well-meaning and serious political leaders.

Whilst maintaining this psychological war of instilling fear and despondency in our people could, sadly, be the task and preoccupation of EPRDF leaders as a means of perpetuating their tyrannical rule, I believe that lifting this heavy burden from our people's psyche and giving them hope they can truly believe in should be our collective responsibility. Discharging this overwhelming responsibility of instilling hope in our people is a moral imperative that requires a collective effort that transcends ethnicity, region, religion and political persuasion. But, because of the total lack of confidence our people have in the political process and especially their justifiable mistrust of current rulers, it would not be surprising if more is expected of the Democratic Alternative. It is, therefore, incumbent upon Democratic Alternative Forces in particular and patriotic and democratic groups and

individuals in general to have the wisdom, foresight and courage to take the initiative, prioritize their efforts and devise and pursue new approaches to galvanize our people. However, first those individuals and groups ought to have the commitment and psychological readiness to play that critical catalyst role. Extraordinary efforts should be exerted to reach out and rally a wider sector of the population including those within EPRDF so that a collective response to the nation's longstanding fundamental problems could be sought and possible solutions could be found. We all should bear in mind that effectively facing the prevailing challenges, properly addressing and solving our problems will require national unity and consensus. This requires unity of purpose on a national level that allows a broad spectrum of participation from all sectors of society so that a conducive environment that enables democratic forces to reverse the status quo and instill hope in our people could be possible. This is one of the greatest challenges particularly my generation and subsequent ones would have to face and properly discharge of as a first priority.

Given their apparent determination to continue to go their separate and divergent ways, it is evident that neither the group currently in power nor the opposition alone can solve our deep-seated problems in a sustainable and fruitful manner. It is true that, despite consistent and relentless efforts by Ethiopians groups in the opposition for a long time, the current leaders in power and to some extent some in the opposition, sadly, remain at loggerheads and unable to see beyond each other's narrowly defined political agendas, self-righteous and rigid positions, boxed views and enclosed environment. We have allowed ourselves to remain ever divided by building walls of separation and further entrench ourselves in opposing camps of either blind supporters of a regime that has no bounds to its atrocities against its own citizens and the nation, or oppose everything and anything that it does without critical scrutiny and whether there are issues of national interest that merit the support of citizens regardless of political persuasion.

Obviously, Ethiopians are justified to be suspicious and mistrustful of a regime that has no respect for basic human rights of its citizens and one that is rife with a history of standing against the national interests of the country. And given the current rulers' manipulative nature, Ethiopians will have a justifiable cause to be angst-ridden and deeply apprehensive about what comes out of the regime, even including projects that are otherwise strategically very important to the nation and its people as a whole. We should recognize that this mistrust is not limited to the regime. It is societal. The regime's rulers may delude themselves that by talking of "development and transformation" alone, Ethiopians could be satisfied and that they could entice them to go along. That is not only a wrong assumption and patronizing, but also derisible and demeaning. For proud Ethiopians, no amount of promised development and "transformation" would be an

acceptable substitute for their quest and yearning for their personal dignity and freedoms.

Therefore, as long as there is no trust among the different segments of society, including between the rulers on one hand and the ruled and the opposition on the other, no single entity could usher in any meaningful peace, stability, economic development and societal progress.

Recognizing this fact should be the first order and it has to start with the political groups both in governmental power and the opposition as well as community leaders of all stripes. We cannot expect real and positive change to take place if, first and foremost, there is no fundamental attitudinal change and without national leadership willing and capable of creating that critically important conducive environment. It is a sad fact that, presently Ethiopians lack sober and courageous leadership with demonstrable wisdom and maturity that is humble but determined enough to create that essential environment.

As self-righteous, self-absolved, inflexible, arrogant and simplistic as EPRDF "leaders" are, and as lacking strategic vision, inept to see beyond the present and bickering over nonissues as a great number among those in the opposition camp are, both sides of the political spectrum remain to be impervious to the demands and pleas of the Ethiopian people for a national dialogue in order to properly address and peacefully solve the country's fundamental problems. If common ground is not found to giving priority to the burning issues of great national import, there can be no prospect for saving our unity and for real and positive change to take place that could benefit the Ethiopian people as a whole.

The indifference of many of our compatriots currently in politics to existing realities is lamentably incomprehensible. The incessant and really nauseating propaganda of EPRDF leaders and their sharp-tongued cadres about Ethiopia's "double-digit economic growth" and ever evolving "developmental projects" notwithstanding, our situation warrants a vigorous and concerted campaign to change course if we are serious about addressing twenty-first century issues that current and future generations are bound to face; but more importantly if we want to spare our people the agony of societal strife.

Changing course and taking a new direction will require a tangible paradigm shift and a new political narrative that is devoid of empty rhetoric and one that is singularly focused on opposing the status quo just for the sake of it. The seemingly pervasive unwillingness and inability to show political maturity to change course is a hurdle we need to overcome. Our inability to do that and failing to focus on issues relevant to our country and its people will not only perpetuate the status quo, but our problems can only be expected to get more complex and to greatly worsen. In the absence of unity of purpose that is national in scope among different groups, and lack of demonstrable commitment to common ideals and decisiveness to collectively

chart a new direction, we have only ourselves to blame for the sad state of affairs in the country and the continued misery of our people.

If we mean real change that ushers in justice, rule of law, fairness and equality for all and guarantees our unity, first and foremost, we need to free ourselves from the bondages of ethnic politics and cleanse ourselves of unwarranted biases that prevent us from seeing in each of us a compatriot whose destiny is inseparably tied to and locked with one another. Self-doubt, suspicion of one another, corruption, cronyism and nepotism should be weeded-out. And to achieve that, political, civic and community leaders should be ready to lead by example. If we have the courage to change course by putting our country and its people above ethnic, group, religion or region affiliation or anything else, we can create the critically important environment of unity of purpose. With unity of purpose at hand and with mature leadership that could instill hope in our people, no power could prevent us from changing the status quo and starting a new chapter for Ethiopia's renaissance.

Those who come to power to facilitate the daunting task of a peaceful transition of our society to a democratic order and lay the groundwork to break and end the cycle of tyrannical rules, and those aspiring to assume it afterwards should vow and be ready to take concrete and demonstrable measures that could be instrumental in instilling confidence and sense of fairness in the country's citizens by committing themselves and having the will to give priority to issues relevant only to the country and its people. As such, everyone aspiring to involve in politics should promise to serve for bare minimum salaries for at least five years or until Ethiopia is self-reliant and able to feed itself, and be willing and able to adhere to the highest ethical standards.

Some may find such a proposition an impossible task. But what is the alternative? Have each one of us, especially those in politics, seriously thought about what our failure to reverse course could cost our society, regardless of who comes to or is in power? Bearing witness to the misguided priorities of political leaders in the current political divide that relegate national interests and those of the Ethiopian masses to self or group interests, I doubt it very much that we are seriously concerned about the cost of failure. But taking into account how deeply eroded our values are and how much self-confidence the Ethiopian people are forced to lose as a result of adverse situations imposed on them compounded by lack of confidence in successive governments and political leaders, they may be justified in their self-doubt, resignation and skepticism.

However, it is my firm belief that it is reversible only if the people are set free and presented with convincing reasons about the undesirability of the alternative and that, by the end of the day, they are the direct beneficiaries of such collective efforts. Moreover, the combined individual and societal efforts and sacrifices that may be required of each one of us to make Ethiopia a truly

free, united and prosperous country can pale in comparison to the incalculable sacrifices that we as a society could pay later if we fail to act now. Frankly, no one will opt for the alternative, as it will only be self-pity leading to self-destruction. We can neither be complacent nor wait for either certain calamity to make us realize how we "missed the boat" or expect someone else to fix our problems for us. Either way, failure is not and cannot be an option for us. It needs the foresight and fortitudinous of every citizen, especially community leaders and those in leadership positions in political organizations with a grain of sensible sense of responsibility, to be committed to PUT COUNTRY AND PEOPLE FIRST in order to spare the country from becoming a truly failed state, to be able to do away with tyranny and grinding poverty once and for all, and to make future generations deservingly proud.

What we also have realized in this presentation is that, although not unlike many countries, our history is typified by both tremendous challenges and glorious triumphs that happen to shape and reshape our society several times over. By having a personal conviction that Ethiopia will survive as a country and rise up from the ashes, I am in no way suggesting that we should overlook or downplay our numerous fundamental problems and simply hope for good days to come. No. I am not at all discounting or underestimating the immense challenges and tremendous problems Ethiopians as a society face. Frankly, even sorting out our problems and prioritizing our objectives in order to properly tackle them would be quite an arduous endeavor and a daunting task.

My optimism about a better future, however, is conditional that demands in each one of us as individual Ethiopian citizens and their descendants an unwavering willingness, a steadfast readiness, a firm commitment and a resolute determination to work ever harder by putting country and people first. In my estimation, in order to break the cycle of and do away with the intertwined evil problems of tyranny and the grinding and dehumanizing poverty that our country in the past decades has been associated with, it might take a relatively long time and may require the sacrifice of at least a generation and a determined unified effort of the great majority if not all Ethiopians.

No doubt the task of sailing through the current environment of simmering hopelessness and total despair, and ethnocentricity-infested muddy and troubled waters will not be easy. But it is not beyond our grasp. Yes we can do it! Why? Our ancestors had done it many times before and the alternative is not to be envied; and Ethiopians of today cannot afford to entrust to their children a failed country and a society in turmoil and one that is condemned to perpetual dehumanizing and degrading poverty.

Continues in Part IX.....