

ETHIOPIA: LET THE HEALING START WITH RECONCILIATION

By Aie Zi Guo, October 2006

Ethiopia is a land of contrast where war and peace, poverty and abundance, highland and lowland, Islam and Christianity, nationalism and heroism, traditionalism and modernity coexist in all its forms. It is unique with its alphabet and manuscripts, 13 months calendar, unique cuisine, rich Orthodox with Yared's lyrics, original immigrants of Islam, ancient civilization amid poverty, flora and fauna as diverse as its ecology. This complex metamorphosis of the country remained an enigma to outsiders from biblical times of queen Sheba to the first immigrants of Islam.

To undue the mysteries of this ancient nation, foreigners have time and again tried to control it either by force or with wild diplomacy. However, Ethiopians were steadfast and united to foil the aspirations of aggressors and colonizers. So much so Ethiopia inspired African, Asian, Middle Eastern and L. American nations to demand independence. There has been no reference of history where Ethiopians initiated war against other nations. If there is, it is a war waged to defend their faith, sovereignty and national integrity.

In the midst of this isolation internal struggle for power and resources between traditional rulers, regions or ethnic groups were commonplace. As power monger elephants fight, Ethiopia got crushed in the stampede for power keeping it in the status quo of traditions.

With the emergence of modern education, new breeds of educated Ethiopians armed with different schools of thought and ideology mushroomed. Eager to modernize the political, social and economic system, the elite began to challenge that status quo from within and without. Political discourse among the elite continued unabated aiming to craft a political system that best serves Ethiopia's interest. For over 40 years, ferocious debates were made on two diametrically opposed schools of thought: Communism/Socialism and Capitalism. Behind the Façade of ideological divide one commonality has remained authentic i.e. the universal determination and commitment to liberate the country from poverty, famine and underdevelopment. What is troubling, though, is that the debate has no insight of striking a middle ground. Even when democratic pluralism dwindled and communism died down in the ex-Soviet Union and China, Ethiopians continued their own cold war politics. Now the political and ideological discourses focused on revolutionary and liberal democracy and socialism. Modern day Ethiopia is engulfed with war of ideologies that leads to political unrest and confusion. This has made the country a perfect political laboratory of ideological wars in Africa.

The opportunity cost of these debates and struggles has been immense. Innocent lives of the brightest sons and daughters of the country were lost. Society has been highly divided and polarized. Suspicion and coercion increased. Liberty and precious time for development lost. Incalculable amount of resources wasted. Millions opted to live overseas. The country remained stranded in the chambers of poverty.

Interestingly the ideological war never articulated the objective realities of the country. Discussants have never tried to make their theoretical and ideological arguments spasmodic to the short and long term needs of nation building. As the world makes unprecedented social, economic and political advancement, Ethiopia remained at the goal post of underdevelopment. More importantly the majority of Ethiopians remained bystanders on matters that concern them. The biggest causality of all is Ethiopia as a nation and Ethiopians as a people. Nevertheless, Ethiopians gave the benefit of the doubt to the intelligentsia. For the majority the elite remained to be the beckon of hope and the

salvation army of growth and development. In the process the people raised their level of political consciousness simultaneously assessing their choices.

In the late 90's the political geography of the country started to shift from elite based to mass based movement. The multiparty election of May 15, 2005 was reminiscent of that change. On this day Ethiopians overwhelmingly demonstrated their wishes and expectations from the political establishment of the country. At the ballot box the electorates spoke unambiguously their readiness to accept a Communism, Socialism or Capitalism or in short the "ISM" that works for them. And what works for them is the "ISM" that brings the Rule of Law, Peace, Security, Democracy, Good Governance and Representative Leadership. Ethiopians voted for real change and rejected the abuse of power and mal-administration. They wanted a system that guarantees their proper functioning and especially that impact on their living conditions.

Sadly the current leadership that attempted to institute democracy due to diplomatic and international pressure abused it from the outset. A regime that miscalculated the outcome of the people's vote and quest for democracy was grossly humiliated. Consequently, it incarcerated the opposition indiscriminately and took undemocratic measures to stay in power. To the wider world the regime is worse off from the one it ousted 15 years ago. Several actions of the regime, prior and after the election kindle the way to ethnic sectarianism and possible dismemberment of the nation. No doubt the country is at a critical political crossroads. Appropriate measures need to be taken to undo the political jigsaw that endangers the country's unity in diversity. In the face of inaction, Ethiopia as a nation and a symbol of independence might have unpleasant ending.

It is high time that the ruling party recognizes the seriousness of the problem. The regime must start working with the Ethiopian people and opposition parties to ensure that the country's epicenter holds water. If not, when the center holds no more, things fall apart¹. And one should not wait until the center disintegrates and things fall apart. Surely the Ethiopian train that carries Ethiopiawinet will continue its journey to destination. Unlike the past, Meles' regime must be prepared not to miss this train and do things differently. It is regrettable that golden opportunities of healing the wounds of the nation through reconciliation were lost. The fall of the Derg and the Bademe war would have been wonderful rally points to bring the divided nation together. The best opportunity has been pre and post May 15, 2005 election. Knowing election results, the EPRDF should have accepted the verdict given at the ballot box. It is sad that this did not happen. Meles and EPRDF have missed a chance of getting their names engraved with gold at the political books of the AU. In the face of EPRDF's arrogance, Kinijit and UEDF's proposal for a negotiated settlement would have been a blessing in disguise for a humiliated and wounded regime. Ethiopians would have given clemency to EPRDF's wrongs.

After the election and crackdown of opposition parties, Ethiopians remain defiant of the regime from coast to coast. Government propaganda machines are boycotted. Defection of senior diplomats, military officers, journalists, artists, professional bureaucrats etc are becoming routine. Secret documents are leaked from the regime's administrative machinery. A terminally ill regime is losing its grip of power by the day. To garner support from the outside world taxpayers' money is used to hire lobby firms as mediators between the regime and western powers. EPRDF's system has decayed from within. Its death is eminent. There will be no meaning of clinging to a sinking ship. It is time to reconcile with the Ethiopian people who are the true captains of that ship. And the sinking ship must be saved by collective wisdom. The people's silence in the face of repression must not be misjudged. This silence is a lull before the storm. When that storm comes it sweeps away all the evil dust on the way. It is true to say that the current government is in doldrums. The ground remains an

¹ Mr. Chinua Achebe , the Nigerian writer

active volcano ready to kick off anytime. Mr. Zenawi's EPRDF won't gain anything by limping from one disaster to another. It is only wise, sober and informed decision that brings tremendous gain to both sides of the political equation.

There is a calculated risk to let people go to ballot boxes when one allows what he does not believe. If the ruling party and the opposition jointly call for national reconciliation, the calculated risk is extremely minimal. Calling everyone for collective wisdom on the country's future will offset risks. We note that this avenue of problem solving has been proposed and documented by opposition parties repeatedly. The ball is in the ruling party's court with three options to choose. The decision to choose any one of the options entirely depends on Meles and his team.

Option one would be for the government to take confidence building measures such as dropping all fabricated charges against elected opposition leaders, civic organization leaders, journalists and opposition supporters. Release them from government dungeons with out preconditions. Call for an all-inclusive national or international conference to resolve the political impasse through reconciliation. Arrange a caretaker government that includes the entire political establishment, civic organizations, religious and traditional leaders, and youth and women organizations. Appoint independent international organizations as monitors of the reconciliation process. If the regime chooses to follow this avenue, Meles and his team will become part of the solution than to be part of the problem. This is the best option to anyone with a sober mind. Recent political events in Nepal would be a good example for Ethiopia.

Option two is to continue the status quo of defying the will of the Ethiopian people and the international community. Keep the entire 70 million people hostage at the barrel of the gun. Rule the country with an iron fist. Ultimately the regime will be over thrown by a popular uprising or come to its end by attrition. If EPRDF wants to follow the path of repression then it is its own choosing. The life of Ethiopians will continue with a new leader who will listen to people's demand. In this situation the only loser will be Meles and his cohorts.

Option three: EPRDF has amassed huge fluid and capital resources over the past 15 years. It has built its army from one ethnic group and district of Tigrai. Militarily it is well fortified. To make the region self-sufficient and govern it, big investments are made to build the socio-economic infrastructures. Meles' card would be to use this force to separate Tigrai from the rest of Ethiopia or ignite an ethnic war with the rest of the nation. Given the demographic size and hostile terrain of Tigrai, it would be difficult for this region to sustain itself without the southern neighbors. There will be no developmental honeymoon in Tigrai while others are in trouble. For TPLF this should not be an alternative. More importantly Tigreans are nationalist people who do not condone the dismemberment of Ethiopia on ethnic lines. It would be impossible for the TPLF to continue as a cohesive regime. In this case Meles and his cohorts will lose while Ethiopia continues to forge ahead with a more determined spirit of democratization.

Cognizant of the proliferation of liberation fronts² in the country, it is unclear who is going to liberate who and above all from whom. Nevertheless this remains to be the unresolved saga of Ethiopian politics. Meles' rule has created fear among societies, making the future as scary as one can imagine. While disintegration is a remote possibility one should not doubt that the country is in a terminal political impasse. The political establishment and the public must remain absolutely vigilant to the impending danger of the problem.

² Oromo Liberation Front, the Afar Liberation front, the Tigrai liberation front, the Sidama liberation front, the Kembata liberation front, the Anuka liberation front, the Benshangul liberation front, the Southern People's liberation front, the Ogaden liberation front etc..

It would be a pity to see a country, which was civilized while others were yet barbarians, the elements of the arts and sciences to be the first one to disappear from the Guinness book of Atlases. Hence indifference and silence are not options to Ethiopians who are diverse in ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or education. Break the ice of silence to build bridges from within and not walls from without. A journey of one thousand miles starts with one stride. Every Ethiopian must start that first stride from within and without to admit mistakes and give the spirit of forgiveness a chance at heart. If every citizen is ready to accept and take this first stride, then the journey of reconciliation is half done.

Therefore it is time to shade light on the right path of togetherness and growth. It is important that the party in power and opposition parties create an enabling environment for truth and reconciliation. The longer this takes the more the damage will be and the harder to fix. Supporters of the various political establishments, civil society organizations, religious institutions, educated elite, tribal and ethnic leaders, state and independent media, business men, youth and women associations, must start to preach and work towards reconciliation by building trust on their cultural bonds and strengths rather than dwelling on their differences. 'It is high time that Ethiopian patriotism and the spirit of unity ring loud and clear. It is only through concerted action and belief that we can take the economic, political and social transformation of Ethiopia to the next level. After all, the new Ethiopia has no appetite for violence, hate, and ethnic strife. Let us build our nation Ethiopia by rallying behind the banner of peace, democracy, development and unity based on justice, respect, tolerance and equality. Therefore, UTNA raises its hands aloft and extends them far and near to work with groups or individuals towards the achievement of the lofty and grand ideals of peace, democracy and development in our country, Ethiopia'³.

In conclusion the writer strongly believes that this has been long overdue for Ethiopia. In the current circumstances of the country there is no other feasible alternative to overcoming the political impasse. There should be no illusion that people have to leave the past for history. Let the wounds heal through the process of truth and reconciliation. For South Africans, P.W. Botha and Apartheid were their worst enemies. They reconciled with people who are different from theirs and lived happily ever after. One can't see why Ethiopians whose universe is governed by civil and religious systems, who are from the first Homo sapiens and the people whom the British once called the Nobel race of Africa can't heal itself through reconciliation. What you THE MOST JUST MEN and THE BLAMELESS RACE need is courage, wisdom and determination. You Can Do It We Can Help.

The writer would appreciate to receive your comments through aiezuquo@yahoo.com.

³ Leaps Forward with Renewed Vision & Exalted Dedication: The Union of Tigreans in N. America UTNA, Aug. 27, 2006