

How to Extricate Ethiopia from an Existential Crisis: A Roadmap

By a Group of Concerned Ethiopians in the Diaspora

February 23, 2023

The Government of PM Abiy Ahmed has failed to lead the people to the promised land of a stable, united, prosperous, and democratic Ethiopia. As a result, the state is on the verge of collapse with devastating geopolitical, economic, and humanitarian consequences. It, therefore, behooves the international community and the citizens of the country to formulate and implement a viable roadmap of transformative change, one of which is outlined below.

Background and Context

Ethiopia is one of the oldest states in the world and the second most populous country (120 million) in Africa. It also boasts one of the oldest Churches in the world. The country was a leading force in the non-alignment movement during the Cold War and served as a lodestar for the anti-colonial movement in the 1960s. Although it lost its access to the Red Sea following Eritrea's independence in 1993, it remains the anchor state of the Horn of Africa in terms of its considerable economic hinterland and its role as a founding or early member of all major international organizations (League of Nations, UN, IMF, and AU). Ethiopia has also been a steadfast friend of the United States for more than a century.

Its millennia-old Monarchy ended in 1974 with the takeover of the government by a socialist leaning military regime. The regime did rightly separate Church and State and implemented an equitable land reform which benefitted a sizable tenant population especially in the southern provinces of the country. However, the regime engaged in state terrorism against its political opponents which included an assortment of liberation movements that invoked Marxist and ethnicist populisms to mobilize political support.

While the United States justifiably supported democratic forces in Eastern Europe, it abandoned the Ethiopian people to the tender mercies of secessionist forces which were enabled to capture the State and the economy as client regimes. We recall with sadness the U.S.-orchestrated London negotiations in 1991, which facilitated the secession of Eritrea and the assumption of unrestrained state power by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The minority TPLF dictatorship ruled with an iron fist and pillaged the already impoverished country to the tune of \$30 billion for three decades, and introduced a polarizing constitution anchored in primordial ethnicity rather than free citizenship.

After the ruthless TPLF leadership was upended by a popular uprising, the Oromo faction of the ruling coalition seized power in 2018, and the country entered another cycle of political violence that blended political ethnicity with political religiosity.

Regrettably, current U.S. foreign policymakers, in apparent attempt to restore the TPLF to power, continue to ignore the demise of one million Ethiopians and the destruction of \$28 billion in property since November 2020, in a power struggle between the Tigrean and Oromo factions of the state elite. The United States has yet to publicly express its displeasure with the systematic ethnic cleansing of the Amhara (numbering one million IDPs so far) and the Government-orchestrated attack on the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) in February 2023. The EOTC is the ultimate pillar of Ethiopian unity. Its grievance goes far beyond intra-Synod disagreements as churches and adherents of the faith have been under relentless attack by Oromo extremists and supremacists over the past four years. We expect more and better that befit the leadership role of the United States—a country which Ethiopians love and respect.

This brief contextual background seeks to underscore two things. First, Ethiopia is too important to fail, whether viewed through the prism of the wishes of Ethiopians or the enlightened geopolitical interests of the West. Secondly, Ethiopia's problems are profoundly institutional and structural, which means that the solutions must also be transformative.

The Imperative for Change

The Government of PM Abiy Ahmed Ali has failed to lead this complex but promising country. He has rigged parliamentary elections, debased Parliament, and the Judiciary by concentrating power in the Executive and appointing incompetent loyalists to key offices; constantly reshuffling top officials as a means of destabilization and suppressing all dissent, including a free press. He exhibits vainglorious grandiosity by building parks and palaces with extra-budgetary funds he has gotten from his Gulf sponsors, while turning blind eyes to the endless crises that are engulfing the land. Equally troubling is his baffling penchant for ruling by fomenting endless conflicts including the civil war with TPLF, the genocidal attacks on ethnic Amhara in his regional State of Oromia, and now the attacks on the EOTC and the Supreme Islamic Council. To cap it all, his militia have blocked entry into Addis Ababa for non-Oromo, especially the Amhara, although the Oromo account for just 20 percent of the city's population. Nothing is sacred for the nihilist cabal that is currently in power. It continues to fiddle while Rome burns, and alarming signs of State failure are visible all around.

The hard question that confronts Ethiopians and their friends alike is this: how can we extricate the country from the institutionalized quagmire into a world of stability with justice, prosperity, and democracy? We cannot claim to offer a definitive answer, but we can provide the key ingredients of a roadmap for a post-ethnic transition.

The Proposed Roadmap

This roadmap is based on the following unavoidable premises:

- A culturally diverse country with a long history of unity cannot be stably governed by a constitutional order that accentuates ethnic differences and political tribalization;
- Ending the gratuitous violence and discrimination against the Amhara (40 million-plus and unbendingly Ethiopianist) is the first step toward restoring national unity;
- The exclusionary and deeply corrupt rule perpetuated by Tigrean and Oromo elites must be uprooted to build a country based on free and equal citizenship; and
- Uprooting pernicious political institutions and practices (such as the packing of government offices and state enterprises by non-meritorious appointees, discriminatory practices of ethnic-based exclusion from jobs and businesses) by an independent and participatory transition process.

To be sure, putting out fires is the first order of business. But the country also needs rehabilitation and rebuilding with determined citizen engagement and the support of international partners and friends. We conceptualize the post-identity politics transition in three distinct and sequential phases: cessation of state terrorism and other hostilities, a transitional arrangement, and a democratic constitutional order.

Phase 1—Cessation of the ongoing civil strife and restoring order

The history of viable states and democracy shows active and informed citizen engagement in public affairs is the key to preventing the abuse of power, promoting the rule of law and public accountability and for building citizen confidence and trust in government. Ethiopians should be supported by mounting a massive civic resistance against the current dictatorship and its secessionist agenda. This must be done under the banner of “Save Ethiopia for All” which resonates with Ethiopians of all regions, ethnicities, and religions.

Ethiopians at home and abroad can forge an effective coalition for change in short order. In undertaking the urgent task of stabilizing the country as a prelude for structural reform, the coalition must be supported by international organizations (such as the AU and the UN) and strategic geopolitical players with a moral imperative to uphold internationally recognized human and civil rights (USA, EU, World Bank, China, and S. Africa). The coalition must be broad-based, and its leadership must and can come from well-established CSOs, religious bodies, business associations, trade unions, respected elders, independent-minded members of the civil and security services, and political parties.

Phase 2: Launching the transition process under a national salvation council

Ethiopians have long hoped that the ruling Prosperity Party (PP) would allow a parallel and independent process of cleaning up the mess left by the TPLF and forging a citizen-based constitution. The PP has instead degenerated into a de-builder of the Ethiopian State and society as we have known it. The alternative, a government of national unity led by opposition parties, has been rendered patently infeasible since most political parties are ethnic-based, and those with pan-Ethiopian programs have been deliberately enfeebled by the dominant ruling parties.

The only remaining alternative, hard as it may be, is a citizen-led transition based on a broad coalition of change by mobilizing all fundamental stakeholders in Ethiopian society. Let us be a bit more concrete about this idea.

Getting traction and legitimacy entail the establishment of an effective coalition to save Ethiopia. We propose the establishment of an authoritative Ethiopian National Salvation Council (ENSC) to oversee the restoration of peace and order in the country, prevent disruption of essential public services, and pave the way for the completion of the systemic transition through an inclusive national dialog on the transition process. The Council is composed of nationally respected elders (statesmen and statewomen) from a variety of fields and regions whose wisdom and integrity resonates with the populace. Its term shall be at most a year.

The members of ENSC will be selected by a broadly representative nomination taskforce with agreed-upon criteria based ideally on consensus. The membership will be drawn from political parties and other political organizations, professional associations, inter-faith councils, universities, chambers of commerce, and CSOs at home and the Diaspora. These groupings are encouraged to engage the ENSC constructively to collectively lay down the foundations of a democratic constitutional order.

A dictatorial regime on the verge of collapse displays unmistakable signs of the first stage of failure: the regime exhibits palpable signs of losing the will to rule; it responds violently to any actual or imagined opposition; ordinary citizens begin to overcome their fear; and opposition within and without begins to coalesce. Since the Abiy administration is clearly on the verge of collapse, preempting utter chaos calls for:

- the Prime Minister to dissolve the Federal and the Regional State parliaments, suspend the ethnocentric constitution, and resign;
- the immediate establishment of a caretaker government comprising a cabinet of technocrats and a council of military professionals, accountable to ENSC and headed by the current President;
- the suspension of senior party cadres, and replacement by meritorious judges, in the judiciary; and
- the election of the members of a **Transitional Shengo (TS)**, for a term of two years or so, which will undertake the structural reforms toward an open society.

Phase 3: A united and democratic Ethiopia is born under a transitional Shengo

The mandates of the TS or interim parliament are the following:

1. Issue a Transitional Charter to govern the transition period;
2. Constitute a Caretaker Government, headed by the current President, comprising a cabinet of notable technocrats and politically neutral military and police;
3. Dissolve the destabilizing ethnic militia of the regional states;
4. Establish key commissions, especially Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation, administrative boundaries, state asset reclamation, a credible population census, and constitution drafting;
5. Serving as a Constituent Assembly, the TS oversees a national referendum on the citizen-based Constitution to replace the divisive ethnic-based constitution; and
6. Hold fresh Federal, Parliamentary, and Regional elections.

With a democratic constitution in place and free and fair elections held, Ethiopia will be well on its way to keeping poverty and tyranny at bay. In this fraught journey and critical moment, the generous support of foreign friends with ideas and money is crucial to avoid a counter-revolution or a coup d'état by self-serving officers. We will be happy to provide a detailed roadmap on phase 3 of transition, especially the constitution-making process.

Thank you.