

Ethiopia: A Country on the Brinks

By Dawit W Giorgis *

'Absolutely Oversold'

As instability and violence spreads across much of Ethiopia, with most recent incidents getting close to the capital in Northern Showa, it is becoming a matter of grave concern to Ethiopians and regional governments, whether there will be a full fledged civil war in Ethiopia. All eyes are on Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who came to power on an agenda of peaceful change. During his one-year premiership the country's situation has gone down from bad to worse with a serious possibility of a civil war.

When Herbert Hoover, the 31st President of the USA, began his term in 1928, he was extremely popular. However, soon after, the Great Depression dominated his presidency. He is now mostly remembered for his *failure to respond to the crisis*. He purportedly said:

*"My friends have made the American people think of me as **sort of superman**, able to cope successfully with the most difficult and complicated problems. They expect the impossible from me and should there arise in the land conditions with which the political machinery is unable to cope; I will be the one to suffer.... I have been "**absolutely oversold**".*

The single most significant criticism levied against Herbert Hoover is that he did not do enough to combat the Great Depression. Many historians believe Hoover underestimated the severity of the Great Depression. Hoover believed it would get better, but instead it just kept getting worse. Toward the end of his term (he served between 1929-1933), Hoover tried to address the core economic issues, but it was too little too late. Despite Hoover's last-minute attempt, many Americans believe that he was the man who stood by idly when the country was falling apart. He served only one term.

Abiy was oversold **and considered as a superman**. Abiy emerged at a time when people were under siege, very insecure and civil war seemed eminent. Abiy's words and some of his actions were soothing and gave hope to people. Like Hoover, Abiy underestimated the severity and complexity of the problems of Ethiopia. But unlike Hoover, instead of humility Abiy embraced the idea that he was being seen as the great redeemer of this troubled nation. Emperor Haile Selassie, Mengistu and Meles all believed that they were super human beings. They refused to listen to the warning signs. All faced an ignominious end and left a legacy that has today put the country on the brinks. Yesterday's rulers had the integrity of the country as a primary agenda. In this, they did not fail their people. This generation took the mantle of leadership to rectify the mistakes of the past and build on the positive factors that have kept this country united. This generation has failed in delivering this and put the very existence of the country at peril. Ethiopia has now become a rudderless ship floating on troubled water

Ethiopia is a Failed State

Ethiopia is a failed state by all indicators. The concern now is how intense and how tragic it is going to be. The warning signs were there for a few years. Ethnic politics has been bleeding the country and now there are fears that the country might collapse. The leaders and the elites knew that the ethnic politics that has been institutionalized by the ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) for the last 28 years was the single cause of discontent and disenfranchisement that brought the country now to its knees. Neither Meles Zenawi nor his successor wanted to address this issue. When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power, people felt that he was going to be the redeemer of this troubled country. That was exactly one year ago. The euphoria has now evaporated and Ethiopia is fast becoming a failed state in its truest sense.

A failed state includes:

- Lack of control over armed forces, militias, etc. within the country
- Lack of free participation in politics
- Lack of control over territory within national borders
- Massive displacements
- Failure to provide public services food, health, shelter etc....
- High level of corruption
- High numbers of refugees seeking to leave
- No or poorly functioning economy

Ethiopia has all the above. States fail because they can no longer provide services. . The most critical is human security If they cannot provide security and protection to the people the governments lose legitimacy in the eyes of the public and people take necessary steps individually or in groups including taking the law into their hands. Other internal and external groups take advantage of the situation and the violence gets worse. The competition for the control of resources creates war lords with a plethora of hate directed either at the government or at each other.

Addis Standard of March 26 states:

“The Ethiopian government, and its regional states’ authorities, are increasingly facing challenges to enforce order and security control over the territory of the federation. Several areas are allegedly not administratively ‘connected’ to the center, but run by local groupings who have either kicked out or breached with the party network of the ruling EPRDF coalition”ⁱⁱⁱ

The conflict and violence has spread across Oromia region, Northern Showa, Wollo, and Southern Ethiopia and in many other parts of the country. The safest place now, ironically, is Tigray. Criminal gangs mostly associated with OLF, Querro (Oromo youth movement) and groups that are not clearly identified, roam the country freely committing atrocious crimes. People have become used to killings, roadblocks, robbery, displacements, destruction of homes and houses. They have become so routine that people just pray that the worst would not come. But the worst is closing in.

A new founded human rights organization in the capital, Addis Abeba, has issued a report on human rights abuses under PM Abiy's government, in Addis Abeba, the

capital. It states on its web site: “This document is intended to serve as a chronological catalogue of Human Rights Abuses and Gross Negligence of Duty on The part of the Ethiopian government under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed”

The Outline of the Report is:

- 1 The irregular appointment of a mayor in Addis Abeba and its fall out
- 2 The Burayu Massacre and its fall outs
- 3 The imprisonment of individuals seeking to establish a civic advocacy group in Addis Abeba
- 4 The Addis Abeba resident identity card scandal
- 5 The Legetafo displacement of people by government
- 6 The Addis Abeba question
- 7 Demographic engineering

These incidents, taking place in the heart of the country, took the already chaotic nation to another level. The silence of the Prime Minister in most of these incidents was baffling as well. It created the perception that the country was leaderless. A leader of a country in crisis makes hard decisions that are in the best interest of the country. A leader does not allow things to happen on their own. A leader, even in the present loose federal system of Ethiopia, must have a degree of control. PM Abiy is clearly not in control. The central government of Ethiopia today is at its weakest.

The Africa Institute for Strategic and Security Studies (AISSS) warned Ethiopian land regional leaders, numerous times, of the dangers that Ethiopia was facing and the direct impact it would have on regional stability. AISSS sees Ethiopia’s current situation as a threat to stability in the Horn of Africa and beyond. A civil war in Ethiopia will create unprecedented tragedy and turmoil that will reverberate across the continent and beyond. Allowing armed combatants to enter the country without a clear agreement between the government and the armed combatants was one huge mistake. I attended a meeting where the CEO of the Reintegration Project Office (Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex Combatants) in the office of the Prime Minister who informed us that there were no written agreements between the government and the parties to the conflict. This is one of the gross mistakes that led to the current crisis. The militants who were supposed to be demobilized and reintegrated into the society have been allowed to enter the country but have not yet laid down their arms and have not gone through a process that would allow them to reintegrate in the society and live a normal life. One of the senior opposition leaders, Neamin Zeleke, seriously complained about the government’s unwillingness or incapacity to treat the combatants humanly and in such a way that they don’t become threats to the security of the country. Now some have become real threats. There are several experiences on the subject of demobilization in Africa. The government chose not to seek advice or support.

Not willing or being unable to have a clear road map was another most serious issue that was not in the list of the priorities of the PM. A road map is a necessary step to begin a transition. With so many of the fundamental issues unaddressed and the leadership unwilling to take bold measures it was not much of surprise that the country was heading towards uncharted territory. The government was not prepared

to listen and act when the early warning were there for everybody to see with reports from many corners of Ethiopia and the region.

Today Ethiopia is definitely in the category of the few failed states in Africa. The expert on failed states Robert Rotberg writes on Princeton University Press (The Failure and Collapse of Nation-States):

“Failed states are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous, and contested bitterly by warring factions. In most failed states, government troops battle armed revolts led by one or more rivals. Occasionally, the official authorities in a failed state face two or more insurgencies, varieties of civil unrest, different degrees of communal discontent, and a plethora of dissent directed at the state and at groups within the state”

The central government has lost control of most of the regions and has not been able to perform the basic functions of a government. People have fallen victim to competing factions and criminal gangs. It is prudent as well to suspect that there could be foreign hands in all these. Civil war is looming over Ethiopia, in the most militarized zone in the world, that can possibly change into a proxy war with many foreign stake holders trying to influence situation towards their own interest.

The Fragile States Index (FSI) (earlier known as the Failed States Index): ‘is an annual ranking of 178 countries. Based on the different pressures they face that impact their levels of Fragility. The Index is based on The Fund for Peace’s proprietary, Conflict Assessment System Tool (CAST) analytical approach. Based on comprehensive social science methodology, three primary streams of data — quantitative, qualitative, and expert validation — are triangulated and subjected to critical review to obtain final scores for the FSI.

The fragile states index shows consistently, since 2007 that Ethiopia is one of the least dysfunctional states in the world. The failed states index prepared by the reputable Fund for Peace institute shows: 2007-17th, 2008-16th, 2009 16th, 2010 -15th, 2011-20th, 2012-17th, and 2013-19th, 2014-19th, 2015-19th. 2017-15, 2018-15. The 2019 report is expected to be worse. For now, the countries ahead of it are countries like Syria, Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, DRC, and CAR all are in severe or state of low intensity war. If situation is allowed to continue Ethiopia will be ahead of all above.

The second most populated nation in Africa with over 100 million people, poverty ridden, insecure, unstable and dysfunctional with strategic location and resources will certainly ignite regional conflict and proxy wars. Western countries had falsely anointed Ethiopia as a stable country with the fastest growing economy in the continent. The facts are clearer now than ever: Ethiopia is a failed state nearing complete collapse.

Ethiopia has the highest number of internally displaced people in 2018 with 3 million. (With more displaced people in 2019 the figure is nearing 4 million) uprooted from their homes as a result of the conflicts. 1.4 million Ethiopians fled their homes in 2018, while 1.2 million Syrians left.

The Guardian has this to say on most recent internal displacements:

“One settlement, in the village of Gotiti, hosts 20-30,000 ethnic Gedeos who have been denied humanitarian assistance – above all food aid – since last August. More than a million Ethiopians were forced from their homes by ethnic violence in 2018 – the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) of any country last year. The worst of it took place in the south, where an estimated 800,000 mostly ethnic Gedeos fled the district of West Guji in Oromia, the country’s largest region. This is a higher number, and over a shorter period of time, than occurred at the height of Myanmar’s Rohingya crisis in 2017....The conflict looked, on the surface, like a Malthusian eruption – in which population outstrips food supply. Gedeos and Guji Oromos share some of the country’s most densely populated farmland, and both groups are fast growing in number. But gruesome reports of lynchings, rapes and beheadings, and of complicity among local officials, police and militia, makes it seem more like organized ethnic cleansing than an ordinary tribal clash”

The constitution established by the EPRDF allows some **ETHNIC** groups to have their own regions (Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, Somali, Gambella, Afar) Ethiopia’s more than 80 ethnic groups are demanding to have their own regional governments. In all of these regions people who are not considered not to belong originally from that particular area are being forcibly displaced. Meskerem Abera explains in gruesome details of the slaughtering and torturing of many, recently in Southern Ethiopia.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hundreds of years of tolerance and peaceful co-existence amongst the colorful diversity of Ethiopians is crumbling right in front of PM Abiy who had come to power with a slogan of love and togetherness. These slogans are ringing hollow in the face of these brutalities. There are chilling messages of death and destruction coming from many corners with pervasive disorder that threatens the survival of Ethiopia, as we know it today.

Below-average October-to-December ‘belg’ rains in Southern Ethiopia has reduced the availability of water and pasture and slowed the recovery of some herders, according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET). As a result, vulnerable populations in pastoral areas are expected to experience Crisis—IPC 3—levels of acute food insecurity through May, FEWS NET reports.

The February USAID food Security report gives a very gloomy picture for the coming months in Ethiopia:

“Insecurity throughout Ethiopia continues to prompt population displacement, generate humanitarian needs, and hinder relief organizations from delivering life-saving assistance. More than 80 percent of the 2.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) identified throughout the country have cited conflict as the primary driver of displacement. Humanitarian agencies are providing assistance to vulnerable populations as security conditions and other access constraints, such as poor infrastructure, permit. Below-average October-to-December ‘belg’ rains in Southern Ethiopia has reduced the availability of

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This is what is called complex emergency: the combination of natural (drought) and manmade disaster (conflict and forced displacement) This situation will further exasperate the already fragile security situation as millions more are displaced and the competition for scarce resources intensifies. Ethiopia is the second largest borrower from China next to Angola with 13.7 billion dollars in debt according to the 2018 report. Moreover there are rumors that Ethiopia has defaulted payments of this loan,

“The intensifying repayment risks from the Ethiopian government’s debt reaching 59 percent of GDP is worrying investors,” China’s mission to the African Union in Addis Ababa said on its website in July. “It said that Chinese investment in the country was cooling and that the China Export and Credit Insurance Corp was reducing the scale of its investment there.”

Governor Yinager Dessie on his deliberation on the performance of the Central Bank to the Parliament Finance Standing Committee on 27 March 2019, has confirmed Ethiopia’s export earning is 1.64 billion while the import is 10.5 billion USD, which shows a deficit around 5000 percent. Even with huge import export deficit the country is suffering from shortage of basic essentials like medicine and raw material. According to the Amharic weekly The ‘Reporter’ of March 31, the governor of the Central Bank stated that the foreign exchange reserve is entirely low and at this moment the country can only afford to import medicine and fuel only and that very cautiously. He stated that the foreign exchange that the country has now comes from remittances, Ethiopian Airlines and foreign loans and grants. Unless the country gets more loans the country will have no capacity to do anything else he stated. In other words the governor told the parliament the country is bankrupt.

With the wide spread insecurity and restrictions of movement and increasing loss of confidence over the state of the nation, investors are becoming reluctant to put their money in Ethiopia. The governor also stated that the 100-year-old Development Bank of Ethiopia is also near to bankruptcy. He stated, of the 46.17 billion Ethiopian birr it has loaned, 39.45 % is irrecoverable showing the extent of the corruption in the country. He stated the bank has lost 344 million in the first 3 months of the current financial year. He concludes that the bank does not even have the capacity to litigate the matter and recover the money.

The Jawar Phenomenon

PM Ably seems to have taken a calculated decision to play the ethnic card to perhaps appease the radicals within his party. For certain, his ethnic base is fired up and their expectations are high. His colleague Jawar Mohamed, another fiery demagogue who preaches ethnic and religious extremism has been invited from the USA, Minnesota State, where he was based to operate legally in Ethiopia. Oromo Media Network (OMN) has millions of followers. Despite requests by millions of Ethiopians for the closure of this media outlet the PM has never criticized the station let alone order its closure.

Abiy has allowed Jawar Mohamed, the CEO, OMN legally registered in Ethiopia to spread ethnic and religiously motivated hate speech. PM Abiy's tolerance of Jawar is perplexing. Giving unchecked political power to extremists like Jawar can only further exacerbate the already tense political environment. Some political observers suspect that there is either an explicit or implicit understanding between the PM and Jawar. If that is the case, PM Abiy is allowing Jawar's extreme voice to influence the youth, particularly in the Oromo region. In any other country Jawar would have ended up in prison and prosecuted for crimes of incitements and possibly for terrorism.

As I wrote in an earlier article, OMN reminds me of Radio Television Libre des Milles Collines (RTL), the hate radio that was instrumental in the Rwandan Genocide. "It's stated aim was "to create harmonious development in Rwandese society" but nothing could have been further from the truth. It was set up and financed by Hutu extremists to prepare the people of Rwanda for genocide by demonizing the Tutsi and encouraging hate and violence. Recognized the danger and asked for international help in shutting down the broadcast. But it was impossible to persuade Western diplomats to take it seriously. They dismissed the station as a joke" General Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian commander of the UN peacekeeping operation in Rwanda at the time of the genocide, said: "Simply jamming [the] broadcasts and replacing them with messages of peace and reconciliation would have had a significant impact on the course of events." His advice was ignored and the UN and the international community regrets with great humility and embarrassment that, had it acted earlier the genocide would probably have not taken place. There is a red line between freedom of expression and hate speech, oratory and incitement. It is well established in the international legal instruments.

Jawar has been caught on tape telling his crowd threatening Christians. Like the 'interhamway' of Rwanda, Jawar has recruited young Oromo's who call themselves "Querros" to do the dirty work of killing, plundering and creating an atmosphere of fear in the nation. One Ethiopian Mekuria writes on ECDF website:

"The image of Querro youngsters brandishing machetes and other homemade weapons at was a pitiful sight to see. It was reminiscent more of the notorious Boko Haram than the peaceful youngsters with their arms crossed over their heads in protest. That Ethiopians had come to love and appreciate. Querro youngsters are Ethiopian who desire better than being reduced to doing the dirty work of others and getting tarnished in the process. They have camp Jawar to thank for it "

Thousands of Ethiopians have signed a petition to the Minnesota attorney General and US attorney general to 'ban OMN media for inciting ethnic violence in Ethiopia and hold its director Jawar Mohamed responsible"

Ethiopians are noticeably weary of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government for failing to control widespread anarchism which seem to emanate from dual power exercised in the country since he became the prime minister of Ethiopia. The 'Querro' movement led by Jawar Mohammed is asserting de facto power and disrupting government power in different parts of Ethiopia at will.

The Way Forward

There is no way out of this looming tragedy without bold, well-considered decisions. There will be severe consequences to these decisions but it is better to manage the consequences of the right and reasonable decisions, which have the support of the majority than to manage a civil war and genocide. PM Abiy did not realize that people were getting tired with his lectures on love and 'medemer', his slogan, which means togetherness. Some people say that his preaching on love and 'medemer' were all about optics; that it was ploy to lure people to his side. At times he seems not to be in the real world where love and 'medemer' cannot be a policy of governing. In political realism nation states are motivated by national interest (the needs of the people). Such abstract moral values can be used to reinforce the pursuit of national interests but they cannot be policies. These are mythical concepts and slogans that are not in the domain of real politics. These are in the domain of our spiritual leaders. Political leaders have to be pragmatic. The theory that a leader develops must be feasible and applicable. Pragmatism focuses on logic and reason and not abstract ideas. What are needed are bold decisions. PM should start by pulling himself out of ethnic politics and set an example and establish an Ethiopian agenda. It will not be an easy decision but is a necessary one. That is the problem of leaders who assume power in time of crisis.

PM Abiy has promised general election one year from now. It is generally accepted that elections cannot take place under this situation. Even if it were possible to conduct elections under this same constitution, which the people have fought for decades to remove, it will not solve the complex problem of Ethiopia.

Many Ethiopians fear that they have no options. **There are options.** People should not feel helpless. Options are born out of free open dialogue and discussions and this should start before it is too late. Non-democratic or totalitarian governments like the one in place in Ethiopia, perpetuate fear and insecurity to make people believe that there are no other options except the status quo. In such countries there are no readily available options. Such has been the history of Ethiopia and so many other countries. But that is no reason for not freely and openly discussing the problems in a very transparent manner. Options are born out of such discussions. The institutions of civil society are the critical factors in making this possible. Civil society and free press have to campaign to create such forums and present options to the critical situation in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia needs a leader who campaigns for Ethiopian unity and 'Ethiopiawinet' Ethiopia needs a bold, courageous, imaginative and transparent president with humility. Abiy came to power with simple solutions to the complex problems of Ethiopia. The rebellion over the last few years that cost the lives of many was all about transition to democracy. Abiy has been given the chance through an overwhelming support unprecedented in Ethiopian history. He has failed to use this universal support to implement an agenda that rejects extremism and ethnic politics. The problem of Ethiopia was and is complex and needs a leader with a broad agenda, wisdom and the capacity and willingness to consult, dialogue and vigorously campaign for the values that binds the people of Ethiopia. It needs a leader that listens not one that lectures. It needs a leader who can have a pool of experts around him/her, people of all ages and expertise, people who can challenge him/her and a leader willing to learn. The PM wants to keep the constitution and the parliament and essentially keep the status quo. He promised to make some changes to the

constitution after election. But that is not what the people want. They want a new constitution and election in accordance with a new constitution prepared and approved by the people, not vice versa as happened before under PM Meles Zenawi. PM Abiy wants to keep the constitution because that is the position of his party. Changing the constitution would most probably result in the abolishing of ethnic federalism, which his party does not want. PM Abiy cannot serve two agendas, his ethnic based party (ODP) and the Ethiopian agenda. That is where wisdom and courage come to play in making the hard choices, in the interest of peace and stability.

That is why the first and most palatable choice for the country is to for PM Abiy to resign and the EPRDF to select a leader who is non Oromo and non-Amhara and lead the country to transition. If PM Abiy wants to save himself and the country the best exit for him is this option. This will require a sober assessment of the situation and the consequences of not doing so. If PM Abiy and ODP refuse to accept this option, the PM can still go for a second option which I outlined in the road map I presented at the 7th Vision Ethiopia conference last December in Addis Abeba. This requires the PM to abolish the constitution, dissolve parliament and lead a transitional government by decree. This will require from him to abandon the ethnic agenda, take a unifying agenda, and lead the transition through a road map established, not by him, but by a newly elected transitional peoples' assembly. These are bold moves and will require a lot of backdoor negotiations and open discussions with ethnic leaders and the public.

If this cannot be done, the last resort is to demand the establishment of a transitional government and election under the auspices of the AU, the UN and the international community and hope that the international community will pressure the parties to this dispute to cooperate, knowing fully well the consequences of civil war in the country.

Conclusion

PM Abiy Ahmed was in Rwanda last week on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. I hope that he gets more aware of the consequences of a hate filled political environment like there was in Rwanda just before the genocide of a million Rwandese. I was there 25 years ago. It was the most sobering and most agonizing experience of my life. I learnt my lessons. I hope PM Ahmed does come back with lessons learnt. He was there as a UN peacekeeper when he was probably in his early twenties. He might have been too young or too busy with soldiering to learn about the root causes of the genocide. Now that he has, people expect from him drastic decisions to prevent Ethiopia from such a gruesome experience. That was what President Paul Kagame did. He took control of the country by making the necessary decisions to prevent further chaos and genocide. His measures were unpopular in some quarters but he has made Rwanda become one of the shining examples of success after a traumatic experience. He was a tough leader, the kind of leader that the situation needed. He had equally capable people and committed people around him.

The Rwandan genocide was preventable. It was not the result of an uncontrolled hate and rage. It was neither the wrath of God. Like in Ethiopia it was the result of the deliberate choice of the elites who preached hate, fear and division to keep them in power. Human Rights Watch of 2017 says:

“They seized control of the state and used its machinery and its authority to carry out the slaughter. Like the organizers, the killers who executed the genocide were not demons no automatons responding to ineluctable forces. They were people who chose to do evil. ... These few power holders transformed the strategy of ethnic division into genocide. Tens of thousands, swayed by fear, hatred, or hope of profit, made the choice quickly and easily. They were the first to kill, rape, rob and destroy. They attacked Tutsi frequently and until the very end, without doubt or remorse. Many made their victims suffer horribly and enjoyed doing so.”

The Rwandan genocide forced the world to recognize the potential of people to commit genocide even after the world unanimously declared loud and clear ‘Never Again’ after the holocaust during the Second World War. Leaders have enormous responsibilities during these fragile times in Ethiopia. They need more political wisdom and a huge sense of responsibility.

I was one those who wrote an article calling upon the people of Ethiopia to Rally Around Prime Minister Abiy. Like many people, after closely looking at the situation I found it necessary to critique the polices of the PM over the last one year. It is time to speak out. I wrote then, May 31, 2018, in most Ethiopian web sites:

“In the end success will depend on the crossing of a fear barrier by Dr. Ably and the people around him and his faith in the Ethiopian people. The Ethiopian people have crossed that fear. The question now is ‘Can PM Ably and his team cross that fear and take the bold steps towards democratic transition? If he fails he has no one to blame except himself. The majority of the people are more united than ever and they will not hesitate to continue the struggle for a final and lasting outcome.”

END

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ⁱⁱⁱ Meskerem Abera, Sidama Politics, Debub (Southern Regio)Politics , March 28,2018