

Tigray, the 12th TPLF Congress and Beyond: Transcending the existing discourses

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“Observe calmly, respond carefully, stand firmly, behave wisely, do not stand out, act decisively” Deng Xiaoping 16-Word Directives on National & International Affairs, 1989

1. Introduction: stating the international context

In 2015 we are witnessing a number of complex dynamics at the International context: the resurrection of the cold war's politics and the Ukraine -Crimea crisis; Greek bailout crisis; , the Mediterranean sea refugee crisis and the responses of the European; ISIS/ISIL terrorism ; the Saudi led Sunni war against Shia affiliated Houthi rebels and the fall of Yemen; the deterioration of American–Israeli relations; America's foreign policy rapprochement with its historical enemies (communist Cuba and Iran- nuclear deal); China is on continue to rise to world leadership by establishing Asian investment and infrastructure banks, legitimizing BRICS as an alternative to Bretton wood American institutions (IMF&WB)

The complexities and fastness of international dynamics however did not divert our attention from the two nationally important issues: *the federal and regional election and the upcoming congress of the ruling party EPRDF in general and the TPLF in particular*. The federal and regional election was an important event as it signifies the continuity and peacefulness of election exercise in a country of long-established history civilization, paradoxically almost non existing culture, knowledge and practices of constitutionalism and electoral democracy. The 2015 election thus needs rigours studies of why the ruling party won all the seats not votes? Why and how the opposition parties lost all their previous seats and not votes? What were electorates' interests, voting behaviour and future scenarios?

But, for the people in the field of social sciences and closely observing the political history of EPRDF, the congresses are much more critical to the analysis of leadership continuity/changes, strategies and policies continuity/changes and mapping out potential opportunities and challenges that could affect national and regional politics. This short note is therefore to discuss some relevant issues of the past that shaped and reshaped the politics of today, to reflect on issues which are surfacing in discourses of Ethiopia today and their domino effects to Tigray and its surroundings, and hence, its scope is limited the emerging discourses in Tigray in particular and some extent its political environs.

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2. National Context: Historical Perspective

Ethiopia is historically known with established civilization and independence that manifested in organic statehood, government and society (i.e. created via internal struggle and expansion) unlike other African states which are colonially *created/imported* from Europe by destroying the pre-colonial indigenous identities, state and societies, *soft* (lack institutional foundation/legitimacy and societal cohesiveness), *artificial* (their borders are conflict prone and vulnerable), the their nations/ ethnic groups are divided to many states and living as minorities on both sides of frontiers of neighbouring states that ultimately made them “part-nation-states” inherently victims of territorial secessionist and irredentist. Therefore, the post-colonial Africans remained in structural problems of nation- building; almost all followed the policy of nation- building from above “one people one heart” relying on exclusive territorialism, postponing democracy and development, attempted to melt down diversities, denying the multinational features of post-colonial states. The net out come so far is failed inclusive nation- building and “the problem of the colonized is in place”

The post 19th century history of Ethiopia, however, was full of paradoxes: **first**, continued independence but losing part of its heartland, **Eritrea- seed for later Eritrea’s colonial thesis “struggle against colonialism”**; **second**, preserved historic identity (religion, art, obelisk & churches buildings, culture) but backward political economy and disengaging foreign policy unlike Europe, its system remained archaic feudal system and agrarian society far from the vocabulary of industrialization and modernization, land as only the base for national livelihood and feudal political Prestige- *seed for land question thesis & “land to tiller”*; **third**, social structure wise, **no viable class society**- no bourgeoisie, no middle class, and no working class, only peasant if counted as a class, which makes Ethiopia, uniquely, a country of more than 80% its population are peasants; **fourth**, created large state, outsized Abyssinia, and undemocratic nation-building policies “*melting pot policy-diversity assimilation/elimination*” that planted the *seeds of national contradiction/inequality* base for later “*national operation thesis*” of TPLF and others; **Fifth**, Ethiopia a country in Africa that conducted students led social revolution against home grown and century long monarchism in the 2nd half of 20th century but turned to be aborted and resulted in unhealed trauma of multifaceted. And, finally all the above structural problems made the country to walk vicious circles of wars for national equality, unity and independence from 1961-1991 and delayed the quest for democracy, agrarian transformation, industrial development, and multinational federal nation- building.

The Post-1991 Ethiopia, restructured into federal multinational state, only remaining policy of nation-building in Ethiopia unattempt before, in which self-determination rights and land question as its pillar foundation to address the historical contradictions. So far, it proved to be successful in maintaining the unity of Ethiopia, recognizing self-administration of nations though consolidation is imminent, stability in the country and managing conflicts though transformation the fundamental causes of conflict is needed, infrastructure and economic growth at national level, upholding defensive nationalism against incoming aggressions from neighbouring states, projecting successful peace keeping missions in Africa.

Then, the questions are: are the above questions still on the table, why? If addressed, which one of them? What are the current status, nature and manifestation of the “national oppression”, “secessionist/irredentist” and “assimilationist” political discourses? How the leaderships respond to? To what extent? If not addressed, why?

3. TPLF and National Oppression Thesis

The post- Metema (death of Emperor Yohannes) history of Tigray is viewed as the beginning of the “Dark Age” in its modern history characterized by political leadership crisis, economic deterioration, social migration, cultural and language humiliation, and territorial fragmentation in the north and south, and blockage from international engagements². All these together challenged its historical prides like home base of old civilization (Pre- and Post- Axumite kingdom), all faiths (Judaic- Christianity-Islam), architecture, art, music, etc.

However, its history was also characterized by history of struggle against colonialism (as symbolized by Adwa Victory and Alula, Mengesha, Awualomo Heroism), struggle against feudalism and assimilation- *the first woyane*- peasant rebellion for self-administration, land ownership, faire taxation and security. The movement thus signalled the beginning of the end of Haile Selassie feudalism as the regime’s political-economy lifeline was relying on land; its social base was peasant. The peasant rebellion later reached the palace and influenced the 1960 coup d’état of Mengistu Niway and his brother, and urban rebellion/movements led by the student movement. Therefore, in practical terms, the first woyane was a revolution. In a country where the king was supreme-will and inviolable, that the political culture was an absolute obedience to king (“Nigus aykeses, semay aytases”), that peasants were too far from impacts of world social change influences, that in the orthodox thoughts peasants could not be actors of social change, and that it motivated others to continue their struggle against

² See the 1968 E.C TPLF Manifesto

feudal monarchism by all means as in the case of Gojjiam , Gedeo and Bale Peasant revolt, the first woyane demolished the status quo and paved the ways to subsequent social movements and revolution which culminated in the downfall of Haile Selassie's decades long monarchism.

During the Dergue regime, the status of Tigray was not different continued domination oppression, impoverishment, humiliation and alienation. Moreover, Tigray was made to be the base for longest civil wars in Ethiopia and transit to the 30 year war in Eritrea which all together made Tigray as military zone, inaccessible to investors, symbol of famine (the 1985 famine), and environmental degradation.

All the above established causes were sufficient enough to conduct armed struggle based national democratic revolution. The 17th years armed national democratic struggle could also qualified as revolution as it was conducted by relatively numerically minority people in Ethiopia with no international support, under slogan of self- reliance; with peasant fighters defeating Africa's most known army, Dergue army, broadening the Tigriyan question- *federalist thesis*, for national equality, liberty and unity to the Ethiopian nations and nationalities but upholding the principle of Ethiopia's unity.

The Dedebit generation, militant generation- the 1975-1991, successfully accomplished its '*First revolutionary vision*', dismantling despotism, national oppression, militarism, totalitarian assimilationism, economic marginalization through protracted armed national democratic revolution. It was also successfully utilized the principle of democratic centralism to fit into existing context of protracted peoples' armed struggle. Democratic centralism used to make its fighters discipline in line of control by ways '*gimgema*'-an instrument of control to "prevent mistakes, and cultivate comradeship" requesting its members first to correct their defects via self-criticism if not get them criticized by other members. TPLF mobilized and galvanized the people of Tigray into a uniform, disciple, mobilized people who rally around a common cause: defeating militarism and national domination. Moreover, the generation introduced reforms like land redistribution, gender inclusion, people's council, health and education expansion that could be branded as "a revolution within a revolution".

All these values introduced and inculcated, in the context of people's protracted armed struggle, by the Dedebit generation should be uphold and mainstream into the post- Dedebit generation in a way that fits to the context of peacetime struggle and democratic nation

building and the instruments of mobilization and galvanization should be refined to fit the intergenerational integration.

Second revolutionary vision (post-1991) of the generation are including restructuring the century old unitary state of Ethiopia into mainstreamed federal democratic republic; recognizing religious and cultural diversity and equality via constitutional and social reengineering; destroyed institutions of suppression-Dergue military setups; incorporated the fundamental causes of century long conflicts (national inequality and land ownership) into the constitutional reengineering, Art.39& 40, so far it dismantled the siege mentality based Ethiopia's traditional foreign policy via good neighbourhood and projected regional integration.

Unlike other armed revolutionary movements, the TPLF/EPRDF is successful in winning protracted people's national democratic revolution and linking into peacetime nation building and development but still the issues of consolidation and transformation of the grand promises are imminent. Most of the revolutionary armed movements of the 20th century , except Chinese communist party, were successful in winning protracted armed revolutions and establishing militant nationalism through disciplined mobilization of their people to rally against common enemy whether it is national or international but miserably failed to transform themselves and their peoples into peacetime nationalism and democratic nation-building which commonly known as "reversal syndrome", i.e. turned into dictatorship , assimilationist nation-builders "one people, one heart", phobic to the outside world . They used war time mobilizing strategies but failed to implement their promises.

4. Unfinished Agendas on the Board and Quest for Transcendence

Agenda-no.1: Political Leadership

The success and failure of Social revolutions, both in the bourgeoisie and socialist revolutions, are critically depends on the political leadership and its succession strategies. Many revolutions failed, after they successfully demolished old systems, to transform and consolidate their war time achievements, and many remained stagnated and isolated (e.g. North Korea, Cuba and Eritrea). We have also successful revolutions both in the bourgeoisie revolution (France, Britain & America, etc.), socialist revolutions (Like Peoples Republic of China under Chinese Communist Party, the Asian Tiger states. The Chinese model could be a good model to our situation in general and TPLF in particular.

Chinese remarkable achievements and continuities depends on the clarities and commitments of the political leadership, generational categorization, and succession strategies. According to Li Cheng³ (2000), China is now on its fifth generation of leaders: 1st generation-Mao Zedong, 2nd generation- Deng Xiaoping, 3rd generation-Jiang Zemin, 4th generation- Hu Jintao, and 5th current generation-Xi Jinping since 2012.

In each generation there are core leaders known for their remarkable history and transformation strategies. They are identified as the “Long March Veterans”, the “Anti-Japanese war officers”, the “Socialist Transformation Cadres”, the “Cultural Revolution grown-ups”, the “Economic Reform elites”, currently, the “Reform generation”. The definition and categorization of the Chinese political elite leaders is not exclusively based on age (year of birth) but based on shared values of social, political and economic world outlook and experiences, and their commitment to understand the existing subjective and objective realities that challenge the survival a society and a state, and transform into a promising and sustainable environment via breakthrough reforms. As to Zhang Wannian (1997) “Mao enabled Chinese to stand tall, Deng Xiaoping let the people get rich, and Jiang Zemin enable China to become a strong country”. More importantly, Deng Xiaoping introduced the principle of “**Mind-Emancipation-one**”, upholding and appreciating Mao’s best achievements, but introducing own breakthrough reforms (internally and externally) like guided opening up of China for international investors by dropping Mao’s international siege mentality ; *“it doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white, so long as it catches a mice”*⁴. His successor Jiang Zemin also introduced “**Mind-Emancipation-two**”, upholding and appreciating his predecessor but breakthrough reforms, in his only one term leadership, of making china international strong. And the others are continuing the culture.

In our case, TPLF played a remarkable history, unlike many others, during the armed struggle in mobilizing and galvanizing the Tigray people to fight against national oppression and domination in a protracted people’s war for autonomy and national equality as stated in its program. It also mobilized and supported many armed groups who were fighting against Dergue’s militarism and totalitarianism. Finally, TPLF/EPRDF toppled the Dergue regime in 1991, ‘Vision-no.1’-suceded. In the post 1991 state and nation reengineering, legally (introducing FDRE constitution), politically (ending Militarism, assimilationism, feudal culture and land ownership), and economically (Ethiopia’s rising growth) are so far

³ Jiang Zemin’s Successors: The Rise of Fourth Generation of Leaders in the PRC

⁴See <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1578761/deng-xiaopings-guiding-principles-are-still-play-today>

successful in placing the foundations. However, most of those changes are results of the war veteran leadership. The strategies of leadership succession, categorisation of leadership and their reforms are still blurred for the generation outside the party, especially their separation and integration legacies. During the armed struggle, we can have the ‘**Dedebit leadership**’, the ‘**1st Congress leadership**’, the ‘**MLLT leadership**’, the ‘**Tehadso leadership**’, etc. The agenda here is, now it is time for rigorous discussion on the legacies of the old generation, diagnosis their reform achievements and failures, uphold the remarkable history of Tigray people, party and leaders, but more critically to map out the future leadership of Tigray which everyone is cautiously wait for, i.e., *transformative leadership within the region and better negotiator within the federal setting*.

In addition to the leadership issues, Tigray/Ethiopia needs to revisit/ revise the history curriculum and history materials at least at regional level as to whether the curricula are incorporating the history of Tigray people including the 17 years armed struggle. The history books should be checked their depth and coverage of history and the modality to transfer to next generation. The quest for Culture and language academes still remains immaterialized as a result our language and culture is going to be wilfully swallowed that in turn undermine our expects from the federal system. Because, the federal system was introduced to protect and develop language and culture, consolidate self-administration and development.

Agenda-no.2: Investment in Tigray: Investment in “no war, no peace” zone

Tigray has been, for a century, a war zone of national and internationally induced wars/conflicts and a result it’s human, material and environmental have been ruined and the possibilities for development, reconstruction, investment was continuously postponed. The hope for reconstruction and development was /is also challenged by the Eritrea-Ethiopia war of 1998-2000.

Now we are in ‘no war, no peace’ stalemate and substantial party of Tigray, from the west to the east, though full-fledged aggression from Eritrea is far from the seen, are within the ring of ‘no war, no peace’ zone. Geographically we can limit the ‘no war, no peace’ zone to the border areas but psychologically, which is important for domestic and foreign investors, substantial part of Tigray is not free of ‘no war, no peace’ situation. As a result, the situation created unattractive or uneasily for big investors of national and international origin. Policy frameworks or attempts to open up for investors could be on the board, but we are not witnessing observable life changing private investments except the EFFORTS’.

The ADLI based Tigray's development strategies continued to face criticism for a simple reason that Tigray has no comparative and competitive advantage for agriculture, except in the southern and western zones. The land size is too small for mechanized agriculture, agriculture in Tigray thus only for food self-sufficiency at best not for transformation. Tourism, service and industry sectors could be its advantages. Unfortunately, the tourism sector is still too weak to transform, and industry/manufacturing sectors are almost non-existent. So that obsession on ADLI and un-contextual applications of federal policies are needed rethinking.

After the war with Eritrea, November 2004, the Ethiopian government announced 'five points plan' with the objectives of resolving the root causes of the war, normalizing relations and promotion of sustainable peace and between the two countries and brotherly peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea⁵. So far negative peace is achieved; no full scale wars with Eritrea, Eritrea's regional military projection is contained and weakened, the regime in Eritrea is in the process of failing, thousands of Eritreans are coming to Ethiopia (good for future normalization), and Ethiopia's development is rising.

However, the federal government and Tigray government policies of normalization, I think, need rethinking, i.e., normalization now need beyond military deterrence, huge investments are needed in the 'no war, no peace' zones either by (a) **the federal government's** new investment policy packages, (b) Tigray regional government efforts of mobilizing Tigriyan and non Tigriyan private & public investors to engage in complex investments, or (c) **the Ethiopia's Defense Force** (we are hearing that Ethiopian Defense force is engaging in huge investments and projects especially conflict zones which will pave ways and build confidence for other investors).

The West Germany defeated the socialist East Germany Government, attracted the peoples of East Germany, finally dismantled the famous Berlin wall; the South Korean are continued to attract the North Korean people and weaken and isolate the North Korean regime, we could have many more examples. The Germans and South Koreans were/are successful not only by media public relation works but also, critically, inducing huge and transformative investments and industrialization in the 'no war, no peace' zones, either by their armies, national governments and international sponsored investments. Huge and transformative investments in the mentioned zones will help to the fastness of normalization of post-Isaias

⁵ See five points peace plan of Ethiopia with Eritrea, November 2004.

Eritrea. But, if the statuesque ante continues the normalization policy with Eritrea will prolonged (hosting refugees and giving scholarship could only be short terms solutions), investors interests and confidence will remain as it was, and in the long run Tigray's comparative and competitive advantages, in the Federal setting, will be weaken.

Agenda-No.3: The Eritrean question versus Assab and Badme Syndrome

The Eritrean question has been remained as an ever evolving and dominant agenda on the political discourses of state formation and nation-building in Ethiopia and Eritrea since late the 1880s. The Eritrean identity formation is continuously depends on searching external enmity- "relevant others", to unify their internal divergences of lowland/highland, Christian/Muslim, Jebha/shaebia, Yikaalo/ Warsay dichotomies. Though the government official rhetoric continued to depict world powers like USA as their relevant enemies, referring historical facts of the 30 years armed struggle and after, Ethiopia continued as their relevant enemy of identity formation. Jubha's (ELF) Islamic armed struggle used Ethiopia as its colonial enemy and framed its struggle decolonizing Eritrea from Ethiopia. EPLF's territorial nationalism also used Ethiopia as relevant enemy- an African colonizer extending western (Italy, British & USA) colonialism on Eritrea. The Eritrean people, regardless of the clarity of causes, actors and visions of independence, fought for 30 years for freedom and independence, and they achieved territorial independence ("vision-1") but "vision-2"- "Singaporization of Eritrea via militarization of young and old generation" seems failing, and the intra-Eritrea relations and discourses are also getting polarized, the 'Nakfa or Yikaalo' generation is regionally (in horn African setting) contained after the Ethio-Eritea war of 1998-2000 and nationally weakened due to continued totalitarian leadership of President Isaias. The "Sawa or warsay" generation, failed to inherit revolutionary deeds of Yikaalo, is leaving Eritrea with no possibility to come back in the near future to instigate democratic transition, and as a result, Eritrea is becoming one of the leading refuges producing country in the world next Syria. Now, the small and young war- born state of Eritrea is made to be enclave and isolated state difficult to burden totalitarianism, militarism, isolation, sanction and state of emergence in the era of global interdependence which ultimately lead to regime insecurity and subsequently state collapse in the fragile and conflict prone region of horn Africa.

On the Ethiopian side, the orientations and narratives towards Eritrea are continued to be controversial and polarizing, and consequently dominating our internal and external politics.

The Eritrean question is still at all odds historically, politically, legally, socially and security wise. The current leadership is continued to be challenged even after quarter of a century and divergences of agenda setting on Eritrea remains prevalent because of the following questions?

I. Historically, Dating dilemma? Three thousand versus a hundred years history?

The founding intricacy on the question of Eritrea is revolving around historical dating. Eritrea was part of the historic Abyssinian, Bahre negash. But after the Wuchale agreement (1888), and later the battle of Adwa and 1896 Addis Ababa agreement between Emperor Menelik and Italy, Ethiopia and Eritrea began to develop divergent history; colonial history of Eritrea and independent history of Ethiopia. The post-colonial narratives of lowland Eritrean and liberal progressive party as well as the post- federation Eritrea armed forces (ELF &EPLF) interpreted the historical dynamics as colonial history like other African colonial history sharing the principle of “commonly colonized peoples of Eritrea, both highlanders and lowlanders, that needed common decolonization” not national oppression being it requires oppressor and oppressed , which was non-existent in Eritrea, and the solution could be autonomy and self-determination.

On the other hand, “Ethiopia was not colonizer narratives” focus on the principle that Ethiopia being its economy was subsistence agriculture, its society was none industrial, none bourgeoisie, it could not qualify the status of colonizer. The colonizer status was belongs to the Europeans whose economic base was capitalist industry and they need colonies in order to extract raw material and free labour (slave) to their industries and markets to their industrial products with the ultimate objectives of capital accumulation at home. Finally, this school of narrative come into a conclusion that regardless of Eritrea’s colonial and non-colonial history, it continued to challenge Eritrea’s armed struggle for decolonization and territorial independence. Therefore, I believe, among Ethiopians, to have clarity of thoughts on which historical dating are we going to advance to achieve the goals of normalization and subsequent integration.

II. Legal Interpretation dilemma?

The legal discourses on the existence of name of Eritrea started with the 1888 Wuchale agreement, went through the Addis Ababa agreement of 1896, 1942 mandate system, UN General Assembly’s Commission of 5 member states establishment to investigate the interests Eritrean people, the 1952 UN sponsored federation, the beginning of armed struggle

in 1961, abrogation of the federation in 1962, the down fall of Dergue Regime in 1991 by the Eritrean armed struggle, the Eritrea's invasion of Ethiopia in 1998, defeat of Eritrea by Ethiopia in 2000, the Algeries agreement, the decision of EEBC in 2002, end of Security zone 2012 , and current no war-no peace stalemate, and so on.

*The question in this legal discussion is which approach should be advanced? Recognizing all the agreements from Wuchale up to now? If so, Eritrea was legal divorced with Ethiopia in 1888/90, hence its independence in 1991 was justified, **which I call it 'Eritrea is part of Ethiopia or not part of Ethiopia versus Assab Syndrome? ; Or the principle of legal invalidation that the latest agreements overriding all the previous agreements, so that to discuss on the post- EEBC verdict issues, which I call it the Badme Syndrome?***

III. Political Interpretation dilemma?

In the political discussion, Ethiopia-Eritrean relations remains as blurred as the previous frameworks maybe because of two things; either we are not clear on the political frameworks of the agenda or we are reducing the argument into “the art of the possible” or the “principle of power politics”, i. e. the powerful dictates the rule of the game.

If we follow, the first, it is time for us to discuss on how to dig out new frameworks and dealing with situation. But if we follow, the second argument; the “principle of power politics”, it is better to debate on the issues like ‘Ethiopia defeated Italy at Adwa, it missed the opportunity to dictate its will- to push further to red sea’, ‘Italy was powerful European state, it was safe not to push farther’, ‘after the defeat Italy by Britain in 1942, Eritrea had no unified identity, Ethiopia missed the opportunity to control Eritrea or Britain had its own interest thus no opportunity to control’, ‘the Eritrean issues was internationalized in federal framework discussion, Ethiopia and Eritrean movements of the time were weak in relation to the superpowers so that all forces accepted the federation as transit strategy, on the way Eritrea was recognized as different entity from other Ethiopian nations’, ‘the Eritrean fought for 30 years for independence, defeated the Dergue and won their territorial independence’, ‘Eritrea invaded Ethiopia, but Ethiopia defeated Eritrea, now Eritrea's military capability is weak but it is still source of problem to our national security, lets dictate our will’, and so on.

IV. Economic interpretation dilemma, Port syndrome?

One of the dominating agenda is the economic relevance of the relationship of two states. Ethiopia became a landlocked after the independence of Eritrea. For century, the natural right

verse use right of Assab port was dominant by both peoples. Eritrean interpretation the ports was that Ethiopia would be weakened if Eritrea failed to allow its ports. Conversely, on the Ethiopia side (especially up to 2001) being Ethiopia is landlocked and the behaviour of the regime in Eritrea proved to be destructive, controlling Assab port is imminent. Following the 1998-2000 war, the third line of argument is looming that Ethiopia without Eritrean ports proved to be surviving and growing though the northern and central part of Ethiopia weakened their advantage , the alternative ports of Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya , Somalia would strength Ethiopia's competitive and comparative advantage. Conversely Eritrea's ports failed to support its national development/survival in the absence of Ethiopia's use. After 17 years (1998-2015) of deteriorated relationship of the two countries and people, it will better for the leaderships to open discussions on the prevailing opportunities and challenges.

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