Reflections on the 12th TPLF Congress

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“Our duty is to hold ourselves responsible to the people. Every word, every act and every policy must conform to the people’s interests, and if mistakes occur, they must be corrected — that is what being responsible to the people means”

“Don’t wait until problems pile up and cause a lot of trouble before trying to solve them. Leaders must march ahead of the movement, not lag behind it”

The most awaited 12th TPLF Congress has been concluded while adding a number of questions than answers. Indeed, it is too early to make judgments as it needs rigorous researches, hopefully it will be, but it safe to ask more questions and reflect on some views within the context of passionate political debate inside and outside the party in Tigray now. Our questions should also be inside and outside the box. This note is therefore to highlight my views/observations on the causes, dynamics and implications.

Unlike the other peacetime congresses of TPLF, except may be the 2001 post rift TPLF congress, this congress attracts many observers both from inside and outside. Though the citizen’s prediction on the EPRDF Congress in general and the other coalition parties in particular were about maintaining the status quo ante, almost it happened as predicted. But the prediction on the TPLF’s congress was beyond status quo ante, and it happened in some cases below and in many cases beyond expectations.

Some of the reasons for which the 12th TPLF congress became epicentre of 2015 August politics in Ethiopia may be: the secret behaviour (unpredictable) of the party’s internal politics that evolved from its inception and as result still a number of issues on the party’s history, politics, reforms and crises are not clear to the people; the timing or rip conditions which TPLF needs internal reforms/reorganisations, i.e. in every 10 to 15 years the party experienced major internal shakeups like 1977 E.C and 1993 E.C. which is normal practices in revolutionary parties and from such shakeups/reorganizations new leaders and reforms are anticipated and as a result, now after 15 years, the post 2001 Tehadso leadership seems in need of internal reorganization ; the lack of good governance and rent seeking (the politics of

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2 Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse–Tung, 1966, pp173
3 Ibid:229
Bonapartism) which the party and the government have officially declared 15 years ago but still remains as living problems both in the rural and urban society; the need to depart from liberation struggle politics into peacetime socio-economic transformation and party politics open up after the 40th anniversary of TPLF; the demands of the new generation to reframe political orientations/strategies inside the party (we have heard that the lower level cadres/leaders openly criticized their higher leaders’ leadership styles) and outside the party the new generation in particular and the peoples of Tigray in general were cautiously waited and observed the pre and during the 12th congress discussions/gimgema of the party; unlike other times, social media activist in Tigray tirelessly and openly expressed their concerns and way outs, regardless of the motives, which the leadership should be proud of the new generation and its demands as well as rising political culture in a country where feudal political culture was prevalent (ጉበኝ ደሓይና ያንግስና); the middle class is in the ‘process of becoming’ due to massification of education and technology (internet and social media) and its demands for recognition/status and fair power and wealth sharing from the national development, dissatisfaction on the peasants, critical social base of the party from its inception until today, on the party’s ways of handling its relations with peasants deviating from liberation struggle mobilization strategies and practises; dissatisfaction on leadership members of the 11th congress for being not assertive, visible and hegemonic in their leadership as in the case of Prime Minister Meles era because our political culture is still looking for orator and strong man; the 40th years anniversary of TPLF, resurrection of memories and promises told to the people during armed liberation struggle and their so far achievements and failures; the challenges on top leadership (especially for President and Chairman Abay Woldu) to maintain a balance between legacies of Prime Minister Meles and demands of the new generation for new policies and strategies in the region for diversified and transformative investments; the government’s GTP plans for industrialization/urbanization sparked hopes and fears for a reason that the region would be far from investors’ interest due to “no peace and no war situation” with its northern neighbour and so on.

Given some of the above causes and many other reasons the 12th TPLF congress became a vortex of wide rang actors and their idea debates inside and outside the country. Even though, the election of members of the central committee and the party chairman and his deputy dominated discussions and debates, the following issues and their implications are also important for future analysis
1. Gimgema: reviving open and long debates

Gimgema⁴ (Tigrigna for criticism and self-criticism) is an instrument of disciplining its fighters/members, leaders and the mass, since the armed struggle, to make them comply with its program, ideology and policies/strategies. It also viewed as one of the reasons, unlike other contending fighters, for the success of TPLF in winning mass support/trust and mobilizing its fighters to die for the stated causes. The party used to make its fighters discipline in line of control by ways first requesting them to correct their defects via self-criticism if not get them criticized by other members. There are two arguments on the nature and relevance of gimgema. The supporters argued that gimgema was/is an instrument of control to “prevent mistakes, and cultivate openness, trust and comradeship”. On the other hand, some criticise gimgema on the reason that it encourages “secrecy, hypocrisy, insincerity, self-censorship, and docility for fear of ridicule and humiliation in public sessions” during the armed struggle and during peace time they viewed it as baseline for rent seekers’ networking to defeat democratic contenders within the party. Regardless of the criticisms, gimgema made to be part of the political culture and all democratic actors accepted it as a forum for extended discussions between citizens and leaders on policies and strategies, governance and democracy (inclusive participation, decision and evaluation). Even though TPLF was known for a culture of extended gimgema and public participation on the issues, in the recent years the culture gimgema and its relevance was diminishing either because of context difference (Peacetime political economic set up where participation is by other means as opposed to war time situation where discipline is matter of death or live) or results of gimgema becoming worthless, sometimes brings punishments to those openly voiced their concerns, even if the mass is still ready for it.

In the 12th TPLF congress, the party had an extended gimgema at CC level. More uniquely, the party conducted more than 5 days extended gimgema at its congress where the mass representatives and leadership seat together. The extended discussion equally attracted many actors outside the congress for the reason that TPLF will correct its mistakes and renew its contract with its social base, both in rural and urban, transform the party into a new phase to fit in to the objective reality in the region and federal level. As expected, the congress participants openly raised grievances and concerns of the peoples in Tigray and bad governance practices of the leadership from lower to higher.

The most celebrated gimgema against the leadership was forwarded by Congress participant Orthodox Priest and farmer who was supporter of the party during armed struggle and now. The priest’s criticism against the leadership was not about the godlessness or atheist of the Marxist-Leninists turned revolutionary democrats (developmental democrats) leadership but TPLF’s weakness to uphold its Marxist-Maoist values of social justice, mass and working class participation and empowerments reclaiming the role of peasants (even the religious leaders of all sects were actively supported and participated in the armed struggle regardless of dogmas) in the armed struggle in protecting fighters from enemy, providing human (deploying their daughters and sons to fight against oppression and domination under TPLF’s cause) and material supports for the war to succeed but now the peasants are not happy with the leadership styles, mobilization strategies, responsiveness, judicial malpractices which are alien to our culture, and finally he requested the leadership to reinstall the good values of armed struggle like responsiveness, accountability, public interests, etc.

Finally, the extended, open and fearless gimgema of the 12th TPLF congress (by the participants: young and old, rural and urban) was held still under the leaderships of old generation (Dedebit generation) but it is necessary to be vigilant whether or not the succeeding leaders are inheriting the culture, commitment and obedience to such a historical and rigours gimgema.


The congress is the highest decision organ of the party. The central committee, the politburo members and other organs of the party are accountable to the congress legally. The participants are representatives’ different tiers of party members and peoples. The powers and authorities of the congress participants however were not as bold as in the 12th congress to external observers for their active participation and criticism against CC members and challenged CC decisions\(^6\). First, the participants challenged CC decision on the rights of 11th congress retired (From CC position) leaders like Dr. Arkebe, Ambassador Siyoum, Ambassador Brhane G/kristos, Zeray Assgedom, and others to participate, elect and ‘be elected’ though the organizing committee decided their status as observers, finally allowed

\(^5\)“Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses”, “Speak politely”, “Pay fairly for what you buy”, “Do not hit or swear at people”, “Pay for anything you damage”, from among Maoist rules of disciple, 1947, pp256

\(^6\) According to congress participant’s and social media information
them to participate and elect, but not to be elected, ‘partial victory’. Second, the congress challenged the CC decision on secession plan implementation and requested it to revisit its implementation for some members to stay in the party for the reason that they could contribute more, the CC made extra efforts to convince the congress and finally maintained its decision; thirdly, the congress members challenged Abay Tsehaye’s (the founder and long serving CC member of the party) secession from CC but the CC maintained the balance (its power) by walking extra miles to convince the congress members and finally Abay Departed from the CC.

According to early opinions, the party possesses a good composition of politburo members from the 12th congress and we hope they will be assertive in mobilizing the mass for democracy and development, always in the field to win the heart and mind of people, address public interests, design strategies/policies for fast structural transformation and compatible investments, utmost care for education, history, culture and language. Having strong members in the politburo, however, is not a guaranty for effective leadership; ‘the problem of among equals versus hegemonic leader’ needs utmost care because the memories 2001 TPLF crisis is not too far from us. An effective politburo is instrumental to have vibrant central committee and party members, ultimately active citizen.

The fundamental question here is not to evaluate TPLF’s internal party politics and norms but to highlight how to drive lessons from the party to government organs. The TPLF and EPRDF are criticized for a reason that the executive organ of the party (CC& Politburo) and government overpowered the other organs; Judiciary/ party audit commission and Parliament/congress; that members of the parliaments are not assertive enough to present public concerns/interests and check and balance the executive organ of the governments. In the 12th TPLF Congress, however, the congress participants successfully accomplished the goal of their representation and sparked hope that the leadership should be standby to address public interests, and the people’s representatives should be assertive to aggregate and articulate the interests of the electorate ultimately broaden and consolidate the democratization efforts. As strong congress members, central committee and politburo in the party are paramount by the same logic in the government organs are critical because the representatives in the government have extended time, 5 years, to aggregate and articulate public interest.

Remark
The 12th TPLF congress sparks hope in the public at large and indeed this is golden opportunity for the party that it should correct its mistakes; revisit its mobilization strategies in the rural and urban communities, on timely disciplined its cadres and leadership from top to lower level to hear public interests and respect all classes of a society, on timely address grievances and cut-off undemocratic leaders. For many, TPLF is lucky organization that the people in Tigray are tirelessly requesting the party to democratize its deeds and to make its members accountable and responsible to public will but not pretending to eliminate it and replace by other. The reason is the contract between TPLF and the People of Tigray is blood based, not a marriage of corporate interest, as a result the hope and trust is still entrenched though not lasting guaranty. Finally, the main focus of TPLF’s 12th congress, to most of us, was internal party cleaning which could be a gate way for the party to fight rent seekers and power mongers, and galvanize its true members and cadres. However, the congress’s grand policies and strategies for socio economic and political transformation in Tigray are not so far clear and declared.

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