

Ethiopian Politics: My observation on the Tigray Local Governance, Multi Party System and the Election

Introduction

Ethiopia has scored immense progress in both the economic and political fronts. When many rebel fronts started the fight against the Dergue regime they had their own different strategies. Many of the political movements had differences in defining the problem or the main enemy of the country and they also differed in the way how the problem should be resolved. There is no denying the fact that from among all the movements, TPLF succeeded in defining the then core problem of the country and then devised a correct strategy in defeating it. Slowly but surely TPLF became the leading organization in coordinating the struggle to topple down the brutal military regime in Ethiopia.

The more the military regime became brutal to the people the more successful TPLF became to win the hearts and minds of the people of Tigray and then the whole part of Ethiopia. Promises were made to the people on how Ethiopia would look like after the end of the military regime. During the struggle, the strength and wisdom of the front was unprecedented. We all know the result was the successful mobilization of the whole Ethiopian people in fighting against the Dergue. Then the Dergue came to an end in 1991. Then it was a totally new start in Ethiopia. Afterwards, the wisdom of the once militarily successful organization of the EPRDF was tested in time of peace. As there were many pluses, there also some minuses in the last 19 years administration of Ethiopia. Living aside the pluses, few of the minuses relate the bad governance at the wereda levels, handling of the Ethio-Eritrea relations (the Ethio-Eritrean relationship starting from the beginning was tainted with many problems and we all know the result of this) and failure to encourage the development of responsible multi-national opposition parties, etc. The purpose of this short article is to describe where EPRDF fails and how it can be corrected in the next five years. I will focus on the negative aspects leaving aside the obvious excellent jobs EPRDF had done in the last 19 years, freedom of speech, dams, economic development and so on and so forth. But somebody who likes EPRDF does not tell only the good things. In fact a good friend is the one who tells the problems as well. As an ardent supporter of the cause of the EPRD, I would like to give my opinions on the problems. So, this short article will look at the administrative malice at the local levels and existence or non-existence of political environment for multi-party system and election. As my criticism and experience is related mainly to Tigray regional state, I would exclusively focus on TPLF which is administering it for the last 19 years and is also playing leading role in the Ethiopian politics.

Local Governance Deficit

Ethiopia has become federal state. In addition to the division of powers between the central government and the regional states, power was decentralized down to the *Weredas* for the efficient delivery of public services. But the question is: Have the people got what they had been promised?

When TPLF fought for democracy, it was obvious that it did not intend to be the sole alternative political party for the people of Tigray. The fighters (including people like Weldegerima or *Amora*) sacrificed their dear life so that the people of Tigray will live in peace, equality and democracy with other peoples of Ethiopia. As the people of Tigray were among those who suffered the most during the previous regimes, the expectation was that the people will get enough attention to improve their life. This has never been materialized as expected. This is not to deny the genuine efforts that have been done to develop the region through the sole barehanded efforts of the people. But the government as a government did not do enough or did not do the right job in the region to ameliorate the sufferings of the people from abject poverty and backwardness. There are no sufficient roads (except those old ones constructed by the Italians that connect the awrajas which are in bad situation), no enough coverage of telephone, postal services, health care and primary schools (there are of course empty buildings for such facilities). The public transport is so horrible that people are left in the hands of bus or minibus owners who decide the tariffs arbitrarily. The public transport coverage at the local level is so minimal. The safety of the public minibuses is not controlled. For this reason, very old vehicles are used for public transport, causing many fatal accidents on daily bases. Contrary to this, it is common to see in Tigray TPLF members or government officials driving latest and costly land cruisers even in towns. What is the TPLF doing! Meles said in one occasion that he still considers himself as *Tegadaly*. If every member of the TPLF still consider her/himself as *Tegadaly*, how come that they live luxurious life while the very people for who they claim to fight for are leading a destitute life in all aspects? In principle, the life of the *Tegadaly* should be equal if not less than the life of the ordinary citizen.

In connection to this, it worth mentioning the fact that during the decade-long rule of Tigray under Gebru Asrate there was no single asphalted or newly constructed considerable road in the region. It was recently that the road construction started. Even that is not a quality work. For example, the road connection from Adwa to Shire and from Mekelle to Adwa through Tembien is horrible as if there is no government governing the region. It shows how neglected the region is. People believe that if there were enough attention paid to the region, many roads and other infrastructures could have been constructed by the government.

Many of the incompetent employees of public services in many *Weredas* do not take their job seriously. There is no supervision by higher levels. Almost all employees are directly or indirectly members of TPLF which makes the efficiency and responsibility to the people worse. Rather than fighting this maladministration by raising their voices, the people have established a pattern of coping up with the malfunctioning system through nepotism, corruption or total submission. The civil servants in some *Weredas* handling land issues are trained only for a week or two. They cannot give exhaustive solution to the huge demands they receive from the people. Unqualified civil servants use their position to help their immediate families and in many cases to revenge against those with whom any of their family member have/had grudge. There is unnecessary bureaucracy in the delivery of each and every public service in the *Weredas* of Tigray. There are too many and **endless meetings** so that the responsible government officials are half absent from their proper jobs. This is so chronic that people have completely lost hope and trust in the system. Clinics and schools at the *Wereda* levels are just symbolic without having qualified staff and enough materials to work. Those who are employed do not feel obliged to serve the people but rather to please their supervisors and consequently the sole governing party, TPLF and get their monthly salaries. Most of the civil servants are members of the TPLF and it is a guarantee against their dismissal. Loans are given to the poor people (through different channels, FITHAWI LIKAH, MARET, etc) and in cases some of them are not able to pay it back, they are excluded from getting any assistance, even for their daily subsistence. Let me mention you a concrete case, in one *Wereda* (for some reason, I won't mention it) a very destitute person was denied social assistance (i.e. wheat) because she failed to pay back the loan she took from FITHAWI LIKAH. This happened even if the people informed the responsible authority that she had nothing to eat even for a single day. The response of the government was, 'she can die, I do not care, the rule is she cannot get it unless she pays re loan back.'" Is this really FITHAWI (justice)? If she dies we are losing both the human being and the money. What a brutal! The local government officials can decide arbitrarily on the life of the poor people.

This is really a serious problem in many *Weredas* of Tigray. One needs only to go down to the *Weredas* and ask the people about many serious cases of maladministration. My strong believe is that the very people who played a leading role in bringing fundamental changes in Ethiopia do not deserve such a bad or neglected administration. It is misleading to see or hear people who look apparently happy. The reason is obvious: the people live relatively in a BETTER situation when compared to what they had to suffer during the time of civil war. But BETTER life does not mean a GOOD life.

It is now twenty years since we have been liberated from the Dergue. But we have not done enough to provide the services people really need. It is shocking to still see people depend on hand outs of the government. The government should construct water dams in each *Wereda* so that the people could at least drink their animals in a nearby and also

get enough water for their daily lives. This has not yet happened. It is common to observe that people travel hours to fetch water or drink their animals in most of the *Weredas* of Tigray. Contrary to this, what the media in Tigray (which is serving the government, not the people) tells us is how successful the government is implementing projects of development. They do not even by mistake report any problem in the region. This should not be acceptable at any standard at this time.

Multi Party System and Election

In general Ethiopia is much better off in terms of political space for opposition. However it is not as it should be. In almost two decades, bigger multi-national parties should have been established. But the fact is that there is no single party (except EDP) which had a comprehensive platform supported by majority of the Ethiopian people regardless of their ethnic background is very bad to the image of the country. EPRDF should take the partial blame for this scenario. In the first place, the EPRDF should take the lead in transforming itself from a *front* to a *party* in the last 19 years.

It is obvious that the opposition parties are not free from revenge and hatred politics both in their establishment and functioning. Most of their support comes from the enemies of either the EPRDF (extreme chauvinists and/or members of the Dergue in Diaspora, former members of the TPLF who betrayed and live in safe haven in the West, and secessionist movements) in particular or Ethiopia in general (Eritrea, international terrorists, some Arab countries like Egypt and for some reasons some Western countries). For this reason, their political agenda cannot be flexible according to the heart beat and taste of the Ethiopian people.

Nevertheless, at least the very fact that some people speak openly (at least in the big cities of the country) against the governing party is something positive. But this happens not in all regional states. In this regard the situation in Tigray is unfortunate. There is no single opposition party functioning properly in Tigray. The reason is that TPLF was the only leadership during the struggle against the Dergue and people have identified too much with it and it has become very difficult now to do otherwise. Another reason is that the so-called opposition parties do not respect the long struggle and sacrifice paid by the people of Tigray and the latter have become suspicious of the opposition in general. This distrust of the people of Tigray towards the so-called opposition parties became clear in Election 2000 when some of the opposition parties made clear their hidden agenda against the people of Tigray. It is confirmed on many occasions that some of the leaders of the main opposition parties (worked for or were part of the previous regimes) are not clean from extreme hatred and vengeance.

There is no doubt that TPLF in its grand principle is working in a very good faith for the betterment of the people. But it is natural and human that without opposition, there is no

interest and motivation to have a second thought on the decisions the party make. Hence there is an urgent need for a responsible and genuine opposition within Tigray. When I say responsible and genuine, I would like to emphasize the fact that there could be no ground in Tigray for an opposition which belittles the past struggle of the people. The future opposition should be clean from the former members of the party who have only revenge and hatred in their mind and who collaborate with any devil just to achieve their individual goal. This is neither responsible nor genuine. Until this happens TPLF is exploiting the situation to get support of the people forcefully which is born out of frustration and lack of trust of the opposition. But how long can this continue?

I strongly believe that it was not in the minds and hearts of the sons and daughters of the people during the bitter struggle to let the front sit in the saddle of power and dictate the people. The belief of the people including myself was that the TPLF would create an environment where the people can decide freely what is good for them. This has not yet happened. It has to be clear once again that when I say this I do not have any slightest doubt that what the TPLF is doing is all done in good faith. What I am saying is that to make the life of the people better, it is a must that there should be at least two independently thinking and peacefully opposing parties in Tigray.

While saying this, I do not personally believe that the existing opposition are matured enough to do better job than the TPLF. One obvious reason is that the Tigigna speaking opposition and member of the Medrek, the ARENA has no respect by the people of Tigray. They are led by the former members of the CC of the TPLF and their opposition is for sure not genuine. They are opposing now the very organization they were leading because they are purged out of their previous position.

My dear compatriot, revenge is not politics! Gebru and Siye have a grudge against the current leadership of the TPLF and want to revenge. But this is not alternative solution to the problems of our people. How come that Mr. Gebru Asrat the one who failed to do a good job in Tigray for a decade now turns 180 degree and preaches the people against the same organization he was serving acquiescently. It is a joke! For lack of a better alternative opposition, the people have remained destined to a one-party rule.

As media is controlled by the government and it speaks only the good things the government does. Sometimes it is boring to hear the same thing now and then. There is no privately owned media in Tigray. I do not know whether it is on purpose, but the internet does not function properly; telephone line is more interrupted than it works, there is no provision of construction materials (including cement and other related stuff) for those people who would like to construct houses. The worse is that despite such problems, people are punished for not completing the construction according to the deadline set by the government as if everything functions normally.

Because of the failure of the TPLF to make Tigray a democratic regional state by promoting the free expression of the views of the people through a neutral public media or allow an opposition to work for the good of the people, it has become a reality that a bitter violent opposition has been hatched across the Mereb river (under the name Democratic Movement of the People of Tigray) and is given the media of the Shabia as the Eritrean opposition are doing the same through the media of Ethiopia. One may undermine the existence of this rebel movement. But as it is fully backed by Shaibia to disrupt Ethiopia and as some desperate young people are joining it, it could be a real threat to reckon with. It is really amusing to see that the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments are giving free access to the media to the opposition of their 'enemy' what they deny to their own domestic opposition.

Conclusion

In my opinion twenty years have passed since the fall of the Dergue and undeniable many good things have been done by EPRDF. But it is high time now before it is too late that the EPRDF should work extraordinarily to address the democratic issues in Ethiopia. It should work hard through different means to make sure that responsible and genuine opposition multi-national parties are created in Ethiopia, at least ready to stand for next election 2015.

As my article focused on Tigray, I must say that TPLF should stop treating the region as its own private company. The people of Tigray deserve a serious attention concerning a speedy economic development and respect of their democratic rights. These objectives can be realized only and only if there is a meaningful opposition in Tigray. Short of this, the current leadership does not feel obliged to improve the lives of the people.

My vision of the opposition in Tigray is a party that is broad-based, that does not question the cause of *woyane* until the fall of the Dergue (for this won't help the present) and which is multi-ethnic in name and nature. For example, intellectuals in or outside the country together with former or current members of the TPLF (that have not yet lost the cause of the people) can start working with the people peacefully and respectful of the peoples' interests.

As the standoff between Eritrea and Ethiopia is negatively affecting the security, economic and social aspects of Tigray in particular and Ethiopia in general, it is time for the Ethiopian government to think for the long term brotherly and sisterly relations of the two countries and expedite the final demise of the Shaibia regime in good coordination with the Eritrean opposition and other stake holders. If Prime Minister Meles Zenawi fails to fix the chronic problem with Eritrea before he steps down, it will be a black hole in the history of the TPLF leadership. Now he has ample time to learn from the past mistakes and amend them accordingly. If TPLF had the habit of consulting the people and taking

their advices seriously, it would not commit in the first place the serious mistakes it committed with regard to Eritrea. Now it is time to polish the Ethiopian politics positively.

Eternal Glory to our Martyrs!!!

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