

# Write-off Expensive Speeches

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*“There are few precedents in today's world for transforming a deeply traditional, authoritarian, underdeveloped, and severely damaged country as successfully as the EPRDF leadership has so far managed to do.” Paul Henze*

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To put things in perspective I would like to go back a decade or two. And here what I am getting at is calling to the good conscience of our partners in west so that they can appreciate the African perspectives and refrain from spiting venomous statements. And your speeches are too often so expensive which we cannot afford to buy. This is a reaction to the expensive speeches of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

In 1997 the renowned author Paul B. Henze was in Ethiopia eagerly following the democratic transition that had been undergoing in the country. “Throughout the summer and fall of 1991 the mood was euphoric, with widespread expectations that everything would be set right in weeks or month” said Henze recalling the mood in those days.

Henze, fifteen years ago, carefully weighing the simplistic and wrongheaded criticism made against the EPRDF who was trying to accomplish the cumbersome task of democratic transition in Ethiopia. He wrote an article titled as, ***A Political Success Story***, (1997) in which he noted that in “the initial rush to democratize, little thought was given to the terrain on which democracy was to be planted or the time required for it to take root.”

It is always crucial to safe guard oneself and be alert about the influence culture and tradition would exert on the way we see and act in the world. Understanding this may help us to leash undeserved lamentation towards individual politician or government. Then we can understand that these politicians and governments are working under an inescapable cultural influence.

I would like to mention here what the Ugandan veteran journalist Timothy Kaligary had said in an article he wrote a decade ago. One may not agree with his interpretation or generalization of what he referred as the “Ethiopian culture.” But that would never diminish the truth he tried to impart.

Expounding on the cultural prerequisites of a western style of democracy, Kaligary in brief discuss what he identified as Ethiopian culture or mannerism. In his opinion, being silent is a mannerism that signifies respect and modesty for Ethiopians. And he added, “Keeping low profile and avoiding the limelight is the crux of a commendable etiquette. This is a unique designating character of the Ethiopians. If we consider this fact, it would be patently unrealistic to expect a press that exercises a kind of wild and rude freedom like the ones we have in America, Britain and Uganda.”

Hence, according to this Ugandan journalist, “democracy cannot flourish in Ethiopia the way it had in America.” He further commented, “This is not to mean that Ethiopians have some problem. But the cultural milieu of Ethiopia is not in congruent with a press that would pick up and publish everything that would seem to be rude or wild.” Trimming some of the excess I would take the crux of his opinion, that is, democracy has a cultural dimension.

Look at what has happened in Russia. After the crumble of the former USSR, in 1991, the Russian Federation made every effort to emulate and put in place a western style of democratic governance. But until now this goal remained to be just a mirage. This is not because the Russians are naïve or fond of dictators. It is rather for a reason that is strongly related with culture.

Kaligary also commented on the Russian culture with the characteristic boldness of the Ugandan journalists saying, “Building a kind of democracy we see in the west requires an open and free personality and also an ounce of madness. And these manners go against the restrained and crowing nature of the Russians. Democracy does never go with the unquestioning obedience the Russians exhibit towards the elders.”

When Vladimir Putin declared a change of land tenure system which would make land a saleable commodity, the *Russian Orthodox Church* immediately came out and reacted angrily and warned him saying "Beware, if you ever dare to sell an inch of the Russian soil to any local or foreign investor, you will be in trouble." This is because the *Russian Orthodox Church* views land as sacred as an ark. Therefore the clergy would rather prefer dying impoverished than see a bit of Russian soil traded. There is a reasonable limit to what a Russian politician can do with regard to land. Making land a saleable commodity like an automobile is difficult in Russia.

These are issues our "financial and political barons" in the west seem to forget or not interested to consider. This is the point Paul Henze accentuated in his paper I mentioned earlier. He said that "both recent and earlier history of a country -which are often ignored- must be appreciated thoroughly in assessing the progress and the shortcomings of any given democratization process."

This is, sad to say, one of the follies of the international monitoring groups who frequently generate strong criticisms of the EPRDF. This is the reason why we are unable to buy their "expensive speeches."

This will lead us to raise a question, as simply as one can put, what *is* democracy? A decade ago this question was seldom asked or debated. The main characteristics of Western constitutional systems -liberal constitutions, political parties, periodic elections, the rule of law, press freedom, and the presence of civic institutions free of government control -were assumed to be its essential features.

And the assumption is, if a state adopted these, it would be a democratic state. Little thought was given to the dynamic character of democracy. Instead it is looked upon as a steady state. Once reached or once legal and institutional gadgets of a democratic system are put in place, it only needs to be maintained. But democracy is an ongoing process in which individuals and institutions interact in complex ways and with unforeseen and often unforeseeable consequences.

Although all the elements listed above are essential features of a functioning democracy, they can operate very differently in parts of the world where societies have evolved in ways unfamiliar to the countries of the North Atlantic. In addition, societies in other parts of the world may have priorities for democratic reform that are different from those of the West. If we simply follow the blind prescription of the west, we will, of necessity, be dead wrong and the story ends as “and they live un-happily ever after.”

As one Scandinavian scholar with long experience in the Ethiopian countryside has observed:

The African concept of democracy is based not on "one man one vote," but on the individual's sense of belonging to a community. African tradition does not decide by a majority vote, but through a debate that aims at consensus. Anthropologists have described the practice in many African societies whereby discussions go on and everybody gets a chance to speak until a solution emerges that benefit the community and with which everyone can go along.

The same observer's comments on human rights are equally perceptive:

“Human rights, another cause for international concern, take on a different aspect in Ethiopia. European human rights organizations are mainly concerned with freedom of speech and political opinions. They react when individuals are denied passports or imprisoned without proper legal procedures. . . . To a large majority of poor peasants in Ethiopia's rural areas, other rights are of more immediate concern. They [want] a right to life, to basic health care, to a minimum level of education. A right to life [entails] a right to feed oneself through one's own work.”

Paul Henze has also an elaborative story in this regard. He told us that he had spent several weeks in Ethiopia in June and July 1991 observing the transition of Ethiopia to freedom. Henze, taking Ethiopia as a case-book specimen (in theory and practice) of a transitional democratization process, he picked up an illustrative encounter he had in *Lalibela*.

“I was taken on a tour by the local EPDM chief” Henze narrates, and had “a couple of hundred excited but bothersome boys who made visiting the churches difficult. Our escort became exasperated and made an impromptu speech to them about showing respect for visitors. Most

of them dispersed, but one young fellow climbed on a wall, waved his hands, and proclaimed, 'You can't tell me what to do; we've got democracy now!'"

Having this as an eyehole through which one must look at the reality of the transition of Ethiopia to freedom, Henze goes on saying that "under-standing of democracy did not run much deeper in other parts of the country. To most, democracy meant 'Do as you please; do your own thing!'"

Paul Henze further said, "Despite the ethnic and religious diversity, Ethiopians have a keen sense of history and national identity. Nevertheless, Ethiopia was not a fertile field in which to plant democracy. Until the twentieth century, the Ethiopian political and social system was evolving under conditions comparable to those of late medieval Europe." This is the picture from the view point of the citizenry.

He has also depicted what democracy looks like from the angle of regional officials. Citing the encounter of an American observer at the first national election he told us what notion many regional authorities had then about what an election involved. Though candidates were nominated at the last minute and ballot did not arrive in time he mentioned that many foreign observers were invited from Europe and America.

Paul Henze narrates the experience of an American observer in the Gondar region: "[The local authorities] had a great deal to learn about the meaning and procedure of democratic elections by secret ballot. When I asked one election official "How are you going to ensure that the voter has a secret ballot?" his answer was immediate, informative, and amusing: "Secret? We've had too much secrecy for the last ten years. We want no more of it. Everything around here is wide open!"

In reaction to this seemingly weird response of the local authority Henze said, "I had no problem sympathizing with his assessment of the previous regime, but this clearly pointed up the lack of understanding of a basic feature of democratic practice." This was the real picture of the situation where we commenced the journey of democratic governance.

“Then would it be surprising if the system is not working perfectly? Really, whose democratic system does work perfectly? Perfection can never be the goal in any democratic system-only flexibility, the willingness to learn from experience and to adjust.”

Paul Henze, affirmed that “there are few precedents in today's world for transforming a deeply traditional, authoritarian, underdeveloped, and severely damaged country as successfully as the EPRDF leadership has so far managed to do.”

However, by the arduous effort of “the revolutionary democrats”, so to say, this humble beginning has culminated into a kind of flamboyant experience that truly engaged the whole nation -in the 2005 election- save its unhappy ending. The great moves are usually greeted by yawn. The unhappy ending that unfolds in front of our eyes was really a hair-pulling moment for those of us who were observing the course of events dazzled by the electoral process up until the point it went wrong. Then, it was everyone’s worry that the country is heading to plunge in to an irreversible chaos. I still get a chill up and down my spine when I remember the terrible doomsday like catastrophe that overhung threateningly to engulf our country. As to EPRDF, it has had no shortage of such dangers or challenges. And without fail it has overcome the far worse downsides and continued to march along its path triumphantly. Hence, in the EPRDF camp no screeching and trembling.

It is interesting to note here what ***The Economist*** had declared a decade and a half ago. The magazine in its February 1996 issue commented that, “in general, the governments that have fared best in terms of economic and administrative reform are wary of western -style democracy or reject it altogether. Resisting traditional multiparty democracy as strongly as they resist IMF blueprints for their economies, they have developed their own political ideas.”

It also added, “Ethiopia, for example, ruled by Meles Zenawi, was once a synonym for hunger and poverty, but can expect 6% growth this year, says the **World Bank**. It is neither a full democracy -Mr. Meles does not allow a political free- for- all- nor a conventional autocracy: Ethiopians are far freer than before and there is a clear rule of law. Unusually, Mr. Meles insists on a political system in which parties can represent only ethnic groups.”

A simplistic and wrongheaded argument is evident in this judgment. It pushed aside something that could have enlightened its verdict, that is, background and history. While the magazine acknowledged that “Ethiopians are far freer than before and there is a clear rule of law” it went on to sneer the political arrangement that gave attention to ethnic identity. Oftentimes, the international journalists or activists oversight the important social or political context they try to explain. And sometime they take rumors for fact. However, they should know that we are more adept and qualified than anybody else in the world to see and interpret what is on our ground.

There is plenty of blame to go around but it would be awkward to censure the political choice of a given polity so long as it operates within the confines of law and regulation. If we are not oblivious of the fact that politics or political system is a choice made in response to the practical needs of a people in question, we won't prompt to criticize a kind of political decision the magazine opt to sneer.

We have another instance to brood on. The 2 March 1998, *Financial Times* survey had a positive evaluation of Ethiopia's economic progress, stressing the need for accelerated foreign investment. It also mentioned human right. “The government's human rights record has continued to come under attack from Amnesty International and other rights organizations. . . . Such abuses prompt surprisingly little protest from foreign donors, who appear to have decided that, the EPRDF's determination to improve living standards and Ethiopia's strategic importance as a friendly country in a region of governmental basket cases justifies a muted response.”

I want to take issue with culture and history. And I would like to highlight that international organizations that provide money and advice have lost little time in assessing the situation where the democratic transition is taking place. Most of the efforts were centered in capital cities; much less attention was devoted to bottom-up or grassroots activities such as teaching people how to participate in democratic processes, or adapting indigenous democratic procedures and attitudes to modern requirements. This is of course a folly of both the local and international bodies.

Too often, the foundations on which a dynamic democracy must be built -an educated public, a rational economy, a dependable legal and judicial system, and a flow of pertinent information at all levels of society—were taken for granted, until their absence forced the realization that democracy could not go far without them. This makes their contribution so snobbish and hypocritical.

However, Ethiopia's experience in establishing democracy in the 1990s is enlightening. In some ways, its leaders' efforts to establish democracy have succeeded to a remarkable degree. The administrative structure of the country has been transformed, and a new form of government—federalism has been adopted.

In fact, as Paul Henze noted in his article, “Ethiopia's new leaders have been conducting one of today's more dramatic experiments in governance. The process has received little attention because it has been comparatively peaceful. The conflict that has caught the eye of outside groups monitoring democratic progress in Ethiopia centers mostly around the cynic intellectuals so called human right activists in the capital. And all this means little to most of the population.

The persistent effort made by Europeans and Americans to promote democracy throughout the world, especially in countries formerly under communist rule, has brought in much sobering experiences.

And now few would hesitate to admit that the task has proven more challenging than enthusiasts had expected it to be. Lessons have been learned both by leaders committed to building democratic systems and by activists who tried to guide, assist, and pressure them, supported by both governments and private groups.

The FDRE now operates within a constitutional and legal framework that possesses all the universally recognized characteristics of a democratic system. It will also incorporate mechanisms that allow the system to evolve and change as the leadership learns from experience. And we know that we have a long way to go to consolidate our democratic system.

What we count most is the commitment exhibited by our leaders to build an open democratic society. Looking at how the two fronts -EPRDF and EPLF- who came to power defeating the

Derg regime are evolving would illuminate the unwavering stance of the EPRDF leadership to democracy. The political evolution of Eritrea has been not only drowsy and sluggish in the beginning but increasingly become more authoritarian and totalitarian. At the end of 1994, the EPLF transformed itself into the *Popular Front for Democracy and Justice*, and a constitutional commission was appointed. After prolonged study and consultation, the commission produced a draft constitution in 1996. This draft was then presented to the public for review. However, the constitution has still not come into effect and no election has been conducted in Eritrea.

Contrasting the “non-living” constitution of Eritrea to the Ethiopian Constitution, we realize that the document accords no formal political recognition to Eritrea's nine major ethnic groups. Eritrea has yet to see opposition political parties or independent newspapers. It has therefore not experienced the political and journalistic ferment that has characterized Ethiopia since 1991. Of course, it has managed to avoid for almost a decade the international criticism on account of jailing journalists or oppressing opposition politicians, since none have been permitted to operate. In Eritrea, the EPLF even avoided to utter the term democracy until February 1994, when it transformed itself into the *People's Front for Democracy and Justice* and gagged and killed it after wards.

On the contrary, the new leaders of Ethiopia had not months to wait before they convened a *National Conference on Peace and Democracy*, on 1 July 1991 to form a transitional government. More than 25 political groups took voting seats, including the OLF, which joined the interim government. The EPRDF maintained its plurality, and its leader, Meles Zenawi, was elected chairman of the conference. Some ethnic associations were created specifically to participate in the conference, and several exile groups were represented. Deliberations were open, and many foreign observers were present. And within five days, a *Transitional Charter* was crafted and approved. It not only incorporated the *United Nations Declaration* on Human Rights but went beyond it, affirming "the right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination . . . [and] independence when the concerned nation/nationality and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged, or abrogated."

A broadly representative constitutional commission was chosen in late 1992 and begins its deliberations in 1993. Many constitutions were studied, and foreign consultants were invited to Ethiopia to offer advice. A year later, a draft constitution was completed. A 547-member constituent assembly was elected in early June 1994 and after extensive debate and some adjustments, the assembly approved the new approved the new constitution at the end of 1994. And it entered into force effect as of the 21<sup>st</sup> day of August, 1995.

And this Constitution passes almost all the tests by which democratic constitutions are judged. In addition to emphasizing the basic rights typically contained in democratic constitutions, the Ethiopian Constitution of 1994 underscores several other rights, rights of children; the right to development; women's rights to family planning advice; and environmental rights) that cannot realistically be implemented in Ethiopia for many years to come. It is commendably brief, leaving many issues (such as those concerning economic activity) to future legislation. It leaves the definition of relations between the federal government and the states to be clarified by the judiciary. Then the first election follow with only parties affiliated with the EPRDF and independents competing as others boycotted the elections. However, given Ethiopia's circumstances indicated above such anomalies in the democratic system are inevitable.

In this respect, Ethiopia should be compared to the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. The transition from communism in Ethiopia has been more successful than in most of the successor states of the former Soviet Union, including Russia itself. In the final analysis, the extent of Ethiopia's democratic development is best measured not by the criticism of international organizations or expatriates, nor by the unrealistic demands of opposition politicians, nor indeed by journalists' freedom to write what they please, but rather by the extent to which the great majority of its people have been empowered with a voice in matters that affect their lives and the welfare of their communities.

Tremendous achievements have been made in many respects and it would serve little purpose to recite the details of all the political and economic victories. What is noteworthy is that the country's leaders have consistently maintained their commitment to creating a more open, tolerant, humane, and prosperous society.

And sad to say, the opposition's activity has become -and more so in the future- less interesting to the great majority of the population as the pace of growth, reform, educational expansion, and economic development has accelerated. And it is difficult to escape the conclusion that most elements of the opposition continue to avoid participation in elections in order to avoid exposing their lack of support among the electorate.

Today, Ethiopia is essentially peaceful and has made impressive strides in the economic and political Spheres. *African Business* (October 2011) wrote that Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous nation with 85m inhabitants, is the third fastest growing nation in the world, behind only China and India.

However, if the *Economist Intelligence Unit's* forecast for 2011 bears out, it will outpace both India and China next year. Ethiopian forecasters see the annual average growth rate of 11 % continuing over the next five years with a best- case scenario approaching 14.9%.

With a GDP of \$32.3bn, Ethiopia is currently Africa's fourth-largest economy, having surpassed Kenya to become the largest economy in East Africa. The country's spectacular growth over the past six years has been driven largely by the services sector, which has seen substantial investment by government and the private sector.

The new Growth and Transformation plan (2011-2015) anticipates that industry will grow at an average of 20%, while agriculture and services continue to register growth. Some analysts project GDP rising to \$472bn in 15 years and per capita income rising to \$4,000 over the next decade, making Ethiopia one of the three most powerful economies in Africa.

This is a success that we ripped by staunchly resisting the immensely toxic and damaging prescription of the western financial institution and governments.

Now we have a turnaround move in the west. Those who advised and ordered us not to intervene in the market for whatever reason have now changed their mind. A number of western governments have ordered their banks to pull back funds from foreign subsidiaries in the East and elsewhere, choking off capital to the region. France has ordered CEOs to close factories in Eastern Europe in order to save jobs at home.

Several countries' finance ministries, including Britain's and Greece's, have told banks to lend at home and not use public bailout money to fund their subsidiaries in Eastern Europe. This is choking off the flow of needed capital to the East, since many of these countries' financial sectors are 80 or 90 percent owned by Western banks.

And the French president Nicolas Sarkozy terrified Easterners when he told French automakers that they should use their new €6 billion state subsidies to keep French factories open and close Czech ones instead.

On the other hand, **World Bank** chief Robert Zoellick warned Europe that unless it acted decisively to reverse this course, it risked the "tragedy" of once again splitting into two economic and political blocs -exactly 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The business tycoon Warren Buffet is also lamented "a freefall in business activity." He said "it is accelerating at a pace that I have never before witnessed. The U.S. -and much of the world- became trapped in a vicious negative- feedback cycle. Fear led to business contraction and that in turn led to even greater fear. Economic medicine that was previously meted out by the cupful has recently been dispensed by the barrel. There's plenty of blame to go around: poor regulation, eight years of a failed Republican economic philosophy, wall street- friendly Democrats who helped stymie reform, misguided bipartisan efforts to promote home ownership, Wall Street greed, corrupt CEOs, a botched rescue effort, painfully fallible central bankers."

What to do? More regulation is certainly in the offing. Where are those expensive speeches?