

THE TIMES OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

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In his book, published two years ago, Bereket Simon has rightly described the ambivalent characteristics of the period we are now living in by alluding to an opening paragraph taken from the most famous novel - *“The Tale of Two Cities.”*

Charles Dickens (1812-1870), the celebrated English novelist of the Victorian era and vigorous social campaigner had beautifully described the equivocal attributes of his time, from which Bereket tried to draw a parallel in Ethiopia. In rendering the *zeitgeist* of his time, Bereket had alluded to that paragraph that has enabled him to unravel the embedded conundrum of the period in which we are living. Quoting that paragraph, he has made a brilliant attempt to crisply represent every nuance of our lived experience over the last decade. In fact, Dickens’s description corresponds to our case in every sense and tense.

The cited opening paragraph from Dickens’s novel, which is deemed to be the most famous lines in English literature, has served Bereket to highlight the trend of events clearer than crystal and it runs as follows:

“It was the best times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its nosiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”

According to Bereket, the above cited description is the perfect representation of a society getting through the phase of transition. Among other things, this transitional feature is transpired through the rout we have seen in various towns and cities of the *Oromia* regional state. Bereket noted that in transitional societies, we have a very strange overlapping of hope and despair, light and darkness and has asserted that at present this is the dominant feature of Ethiopia. On one hand, we see the insignia of hope all around us that is signified by the miraculous phenomenon of progress, while on other hand, we look erratic instances of troubles that could be accounted as dark spots on the regalia of hope (light).

The good news, however, is that the darkness is always ebbing and the brightness is increasing. These pathetic incidents I have referred to as “darkness” have their root in the old order. These incidents are simply the ghosts of the demolished regimes that have outlived the time of their burial, and Bereket seems to be reminding us this fact and telling us that we should not panic about it. Bereket is trying to imply that the occurrences of these incompatible happenings are the natural characteristics of societies that are going through a transition.

The point is, we are virtually leaving the darkness behind us and getting into the brightly shining and glittering zone that lay ahead of us. We are witnessing the increasingly glimmering light that is reassuring us that we are on the right track. We put in place well articulated development policy that has so far been proved to be worthwhile and effective. Now, what we need is that we keep moving, without fail, along the path that we have charted and be unfailingly alert on things that may push us off the track and promptly act to debug every mistakes or challenges all along the line.

This time around, Ethiopia is accustomed to listen to a piece of compliments on every news hours of the local and international media. International agencies have declared that Ethiopia has attained some MDGs ahead of the time set for the goals, and is undertaking promising strive to accomplish others. What's more, Ethiopia is acclaimed for its admirable performance

in ensuring food security on a national level. In addition, WHO has also recently announced that the life expectancy of its citizen has risen from 45 years, back in 1990s, to 64 years in 2014. Furthermore, Ethiopia has made commendable progress in reducing poverty and in ensuring fair distribution of wealth. Also it is applauded for the successful peacekeeping missions of its defense force in the horn of Africa and beyond. Still, UNECA is encouraging African countries to emulate the various policies Ethiopia has developed.

That is lovely!

The abovementioned achievements are indeed nothing but miracles for a country that had been referred to as the “foster-child of western donors.” Thus, it is receiving a positive light on the international and regional stages. As Ethiopia is displaying such amazing performance in all spheres of developments, the stereotypic negative image that has been lingering with her for a long time now is beginning to dissipate and being replaced by positive representations. To that extent, its acceptance on diplomatic forum has increased and it’s being received with high regard on various international occasions. In a nut shell, Ethiopia is rising.

These are the sunny side of the current Ethiopian narratives. But there are pockets of darkness on this “regalia of light” that Ethiopia has draped over its shoulder. We have no shortage of these problems. There are many challenges that require our close attention. One among these challenges is the hideous incident that we had recently observed in some areas of the *Oromia* regional state.

Instigated by the anti-peace elements who often wanted to subvert rule of law, the unrest have caused unpardonable damage to the lives and properties. These anti-peace elements have usually shown avid interest to hinge on any criminal activities. Thus, they have taken the master plan as a good excuse to amiss the constitutional order.

They have never failed to exploit opportunities that could help them in subverting our fledgling democracy. They are always ready to scavenging on the dead bodies of every mishap and infallibly try hard to create eclipse on our ever invigorating democratic order.

These anti-peace elements who vowed to undermine the constitutional order, have enthusiastically grabbed on the master plan to advance their hidden political agendas. They have banked on misinforming the public to garner support. We know that some opposition political parties are always standing by to seize the day to sabotage our democratic order and to distract our attention from the backbreaking development goals we set and are working day and night to accomplish.

Shameless opposition party leaders who are ready to come out to all public space to instigate violence and to maneuver innocent university students always try to amplify any crisis so that it could easily culminate to a scale that could undermine the constitutional order. This time around, foreseeing that the master plan is a malleable subject that could be manipulated in promoting their interest they opt to grab the agenda. To get support for their criminal schema, they fib about the objective of the project which was, however, belied when the officials took expedient measure to explain the intents of the master plan.

At any rate, as they were bending on creating confusion among the public and tried to maneuver issues they have managed to ignite a havoc that has claimed the lives of innocent civilians and caused the destruction of public and private properties. They have, not erroneously, but intentionally misinterpreted the plan as measure taken by the city administration to erode the sovereignty of the people of *Oromia*. Without providing proof, these opposition parties argue that the master plan was meant to take possession of large pitch of land from the neighboring special zone of *Oromia -Finfine*.

The riots caused by the integrated master plan of the city of Addis Ababa and the *Finfine* zone was utterly nonsense. These anti-constitutional elements have embarked on misinforming the

public with their baseless poly. It was just the result of a sheer stratagem of opposition political parties that has led naive university students to be a cannon-fodder for their anti-constitutional project.

To our dismay, majority of the rioters happen to be university students, who are studying in different higher education institutions and are thus expected to have first seen which way the wind blows before they fanatically went out to join the riot. Though they cannot beat the system, they were in fact partially successful in manipulating some university students who have employed themselves in those destructive riots.

However, those who have perceived the purpose of the master plan mistakenly had come to see reason after they had gotten explanation from government officials and have realized that the master plan was actually meant for the benefit of the people of the zone.

UNHOLY MARRIAGE

Following the incidents occurred in some areas of the *Oromoia* region, another group joins in the campaign orchestrated around the issue of the master plan. Two groups that would otherwise assume acute adversarial relationship began to curiously stick together in full cry of the master plan and work in harness. These groups who have subscribed to two divergent and incompatible political orientations stood in unison in protesting against the project. Those who had been cocking the riot criticize the integrated master plan alleging that it contravenes the limits of the constitution. Hence, they seem to be standing in defense of the constitution, while their partners are calling for the total nullification of the constitution. In effect, both are out to subvert the constitution; the one talking about its love for the constitution, while the other crying the hatred it's harboring. This event has given me curious notion that the constitution needs to be guarded not only from its enemies, but it should be saved from harm inflicted by its lovers as well. Now they work in harness, but late in the day, they will part company and soon their partnership will end in tears.

The former imply, if the master plan comes into effect, it will be the transgression of the constitution and accuses the government for that. They later is longing to see the day when the constitution thrown to the dust bin. Following the incidents, the later were apt to realize that the event could be screwed to mount a renewed campaign against the federal dispensation. So they join their hands and the integrated master plan has instantly become a “joint venture” project for the chauvinists and the narrow nationalists. They will only keep the flag flying, until they come to the point where they can no more stick together.

In Charles Dickens’s novel, you have a perfect analogy. Dickens’s novel tells us the story of a romantic French aristocrat Charles Darnay and a cynical English barrister Sydeny Carton. Darnay and Carton look similar but are very different in their personalities. But they fall deeply in love with the same woman, Lucie Manette. In our case, the integrated master plan has turned out to be the “Lucie Manette” to these chunks of chauvinist and narrow nationalist, who deeply fall in love with and vying to use the master plan as a windfall opportunity to subvert the constitutional order. Like Darnay and Carton, they look similar but are away from each other, as heaven from the earth in their political orientations.

Nonetheless, the master plan has become a bipartisan agenda for the chauvinists and narrow nationalists; thus they forge a common front and engaged in exacerbating and fanning the flames of enmity between the people who have had a long history of peaceful co-existence – an emblem of the various nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. Paradoxically, those who are fond of the *ancien régimes*, i.e. the old orders and those who utterly oppose those regimes have come to work in tandem. But, the unholy marriage of these groups will only be concluded in frustration.

Now, I would like to appraise an agenda raised by some chauvinists in relation to the recent riot and the integrated master plan. I have tried to read and listen to the exchange of ideas and opinions and I have concluded that we need further discussion on how and why Ethiopia chose to adopt a federal dispensation. Critics of our federal system have even suggested that we must

put an end to the federal arrangement, if we wish to ward off the possible occurrences of any problem like the one we have faced in relation to the integrated master plan. Can this be a solution any way?

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

There has been a heated exchange of words over the federal dispensation of our country, which at times tends to be disconcerting. That is alright. When societies such as ours, are confronted with such an alien animal like *federalism*, it would be natural to have debate over any anticipated problems that may come with the new arrangement.

Therefore, like many societies before us, we have argued over and discuss about the merit of the federal dispensation, as it would have immense implication to the general lives of the Ethiopian people. As a result, issues related to a federal arrangement were and will be discussed. However, it would be heartrending to observe trades of blows or shoving to settle disagreements over a matter that would only be resolved through exchanges of words.

Besides, disposing oneself to unfounded arguments would deny the vantage point of correctly appraising problems and getting at judicious conclusion. If we tend to be illogical in our argument, we cannot get on to the ideas and frustrations of our contenders and it would even hinder our understanding. This would consequently bring us to an insurmountable problem that would terribly frustrate our effort to reach at solution we strive to come to grips with. If we wish to engage problematic issues earnestly, then, we must put irrational notions off.

In my view, the routing ideas of our constitution and the rationale that has led us to opt for a federal arrangement lies in our historical narratives. This narrative had put, for some groups in Ethiopia, the price of unity off. Put another way, there were historical events that have made the price of unity to high for some groups in Ethiopia. Hence, the decision to put article 39 in the constitution should be deemed to be wise for those who were proponents of unity; to be

more precise, “unity in diversity” --as they would like to put it. By doing that, they were just trying to widen the bargaining range.

We must understand that in politics, like in an international trade, it's how we handle our client, above all else, that can make or break a deal. Thus, do not always show your adversaries up by acting in a stupid manner. If one wants to sell ones ideas to others, one must come up with wide margins into the costing of his ideas, which would enable him to reach at mutually beneficial deal. Do not forget that we are in a market place of ideas, where everyone is free to pick his choice up and go. Do not only play games only to win and try to develop the ability to read signals correctly. When you only insist on more favorable terms to your side, you would be unable to explore various ways of trading your ideas in manners that could become a mutually beneficial deal.

On other hand, it is as foolish to assume to have a monopoly of truth and pay no attention to what others say, as it would be silly to try to negotiate over an eaten cake. Therefore, we must try to go out of our way and seek to understand the concerns of others. If you tend to be inattentive to the worries of others you would simply fan the flames of your disagreements and worsen the problem you wanted to solve.

Failure to attend the anxieties of your contenders would deny you the chance to appreciate the perspective of the others and thus you would carry on confronting your challengers with admonishing spirit that would serve nothing, but widen your difference. If you want the other people with whom you are negotiating with to take your concerns seriously do the same to their ideas.

As pointed above, our historical trajectory has put the price of unity off. Thus, nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia have looked back and become hesitant to grab the option of unity. To get around the obstacles that have made the price of unity to high, we must widen the bargaining rage. Unless you allow enough room for movement in your 'bargaining range'

you would not be able to explore proper options that could help you to resolve problem. When you are locked in your shell, you will be unable to see the contentious issues more clearly. So, if you do not want to be a loser, we must try to explore, rather eliminate options. We need also to have a well thought argument that could reward us in the end - a clear 'entry' and 'exit' points.

In fact, it is important to know the bargaining range of your partners. And should understand how wide your partners expect your bargaining range to be. As some groups in Ethiopia have historical experience that have made "unity" an impossible option, EPRDF had the gut to come out of the box that had kept the bargaining range so narrow and tried to come up with another option by dropping the conventional alternative that has unfortunately led some groups to be suspicious of their partners.

EPRDF not only regard this negotiation as a process to be enjoyed but also a democratic procedure that should be respected. This was the option that has closed the wider gap and gave good opportunity to all actors to try the new option -unity in diversity.

Let us for a moment forget the final target and get back to the entry point where we were discussing and appraising the new option. It would be a flagrant act and an affront to deny justice to the concerns of the people who has turned their back on an unqualified option of "unity." We must admit the feeling of resentment and apprehension they had been harboring. If someone tells you that he regularly travels to the moon, you would never believe his blatant lie. Being so anxious about the chance of the vanishing of their freedom in hustle and bustle made around the option of "unity," they had become so skeptic. It would then be a flagrant "criminal act" to ignore this apprehension, as an act of setting fire to somebody's house would be. Above all, it does not serve the noble purpose of ensuring the unity of the nation and the Ethiopian people. Consequently, EPRDF has opted for the inclusion of article 39 in the federal constitution and thus made the resurrection of the unity of our beloved nation Ethiopia possible, by laying a new foundation for the establishment of the *Federal Democratic Republic*

of Ethiopia, where the nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia are constitutionally designated to be the sovereign power of their the nation and their respective regional sates. This is how the EPRDF, in 1991, has rescued our country from the eminent danger of disintegration. Thus, I argue, that EPRDF is the creator and investor of Ethiopia's unity through diversity.

However, opponents of the ruling party are still accusing EPRDF that it is dubiously working for the unity of Ethiopia and fomenting and escalating animosity among nationalities and alleged that the ruling party is edging away the country to the brink of disintegration. However, the federal dispensation put in place in our country was meant to abolish the multifarious oppression of the nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia and designed with the clear intention of averting secession and disintegration. To that extent, EPRDF should be designated and recognized as a force that has fostered and founded the national unity of Ethiopia by way of recognizing its diversity.

But much often than not, EPRDF is unjustifiably criticized for initiating an untenable political project that is edging the country to the brink of disintegration. In fact, EPRDF has done commendable jobs in forging a new democratic regime that would co-opt all armed rebels into an all inclusive political system and thus avert national disintegration of Ethiopia.

Decentralization was designed as a strategy to abate the eminent danger of collapse by appeasing political forces who were ardent proponents of secession. Nonetheless, its critics have never failed to lay the blame on EPRDF for creating fragmented administrative units that are bound to fall apart.

ETHIOPIA'S FEDERATION

There is a long research tradition that attests the potential of a federal arrangement in serving as a tool to ward off and manage conflict in multi-ethnic nations like ours. Federalism is not a matter of power decentralization. Rather, federalism presupposes a division of sovereignty and

constitutionally protected status autonomy for the devolved units. Unlike the provinces within a decentralized unitary state, these units are usually states in their own right with parliaments, governments and a distinct political process, whose rights can only be revoked by a constitutional amendment.

Researchers have tried to statistically assess the role of federal institutions in the transition from war to peace. On the basis of their data many researchers have affirmed that that decentralization is a valuable tool for peace-making in the short run, but in the long run it may work as a major incentive for secession and disintegration. However, there are also researchers who made qualitative comparisons of some federations and have obtained a different result.

These researchers claimed that federalism would not be an easy model to adopt and only 'true autonomy prevents secession.' They also argued that only those federations who came together on a voluntary basis (by aggregation) have been able to manage internal conflict well, while the 'holding together' federations of former empires are *de facto* 'pseudo-federations' that were doomed to fail. Ethiopia's federation is a 'coming together' that has granted a true autonomy to its devolved units. Thus, Ethiopia's federation is a valuable tool for peace-making and is instrumental in preventing secession. But, is it stable? What are the decisive elements that make a federal system stable?

Researchers have identified a number of variables that would make a federal system stable. According to these scholars factors that could help to effect stable federal system are, a democratic rule based on consociational power which is made by a group of political parties (a minimum number of three major ethnic groups) who work together to share power at the central level, and a certain level of socio-economic development that may allow the implementation of various instruments of fiscal equalization and distributive fairness.

The researchers have also proposed a typology of conflict mitigating and conflict intensifying effects of decentralization. One positive effect of decentralization is the political inclusion of

new groups. The decentralization in Ethiopia has thus increased the representative character of the political system.

Consequently, the decentralization has fostered the political stability and national unity by granting greater autonomy to the territorially concentrated nations and nationalities that have entered into a formal bargaining process with the federal government. Decentralization has also helped the state to establish central government authority in areas where state penetration had been weak, and thereby increasing the legitimacy of public institutions.

On the other hand, there are also recognized the danger of decentralization. Decentralization may lead to the intensification of conflicts. This might happen when forces whose loyalty to the central government is not guaranteed get wide political space and when there are forces who are not interested in a peaceful transformation of conflicts. Decentralization may also exacerbate regional differences in socio-economic development which might easily lead to a further polarization along regional lines.

While we affirm the ambivalent role of decentralization, i.e. cohesion and polarization, any assessment of whether these potential effects would occur depends on a number of critical variables. These variables include the specific contexts, both of countries and also of micro-social settings and the prevailing constellation of actors. Certainly, it can be assumed that the design of decentralization itself is also an important matter for conflict dynamics and management.

EPRDF has devolved the central power as a conflict management tool. Analysis of the experiences of Ethiopia over the last two decades has revealed that the decentralization policies co-opt rebels and marginalized nationalities into the political system. Thus, it has ensured the unity, peace and development of Ethiopia.