

TPLF and “Abay Tigray ” the Specter of Eritrean Delusion and its nexus with the Ethiopian extremists

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This piece of article is a culmination of thoughts often pop up in my mind when I try to fathom the grammar and motives of the ultranationalists both from Eritrea and Ethiopia on their incessant attacks to the EPRDF party and the government it leads. The conspicuous sameness in grammar usage defines the convergence of their intent and efforts.

In contrary to the obsession many intellectual Eritreans hold, “Abay Tigray” is an alien phrase to Tigreans of my generation. The first time I heard the phrase was from the veteran Eritrean artist Bereket Mengisteab (when he was at his best and somewhere in 1994), in one of his songs that goes something to this effect:

ተመንየያ ኔረ ተመንየያ፤

ትግራይ ዓባይ ብዓይነይኳ ሪኬያ።

Mind you- the song has been in public domain for years and in the usual usage of the term, We Tigreans used to use ትግራይ ዓዲይ and not ትግራይ ዓባይ. The distinction between ዓባይ and ዓዲይ was not obvious to me until the recent decade where the spell has become a hotcake among the ultranationalists of both camps albeit on different accounts: the Eritrean side claims the sinister move of TPLF to unite the Tigrigna-speaking people in Tigray and their kinfolks in the highlands of Eritrea while the Ethiopian side accuses on ground of territorial ambitions for a mere addition of few kebeles while turning a blind eye to what Tigray had to forfeit during the rearrangement of the federal administration and the large swath of land handed over to wollo as dowry and gesture of good will during the kings era.

Irrespective of its merit, “Abay Tigray” never existed in any form as a political aspiration of Tigreans of any persuasion be it TPLF or otherwise. TPLF, as organized and disciplined entity, operates based on clearly articulated programs written in black and white as outcome of every congress conducted over the years. Even when it erred as in the declaration of the short-lived “Tigray Republic” manifesto, TPLF had

to state the following in its preamble as to where the boundary of the “New Republic” should fall along with the mix of the ethnic groups historically lived on it for centuries.

የትግራይ ህዝብ ማለት በትግራይ ውስጥ የሚኖሩትንና በተለያዩ ምክንያት ከትግራይ መሬት ውጭ የሚኖሩትን ህዝቦች
በሙሉ ያጠቃለለ(ትግርኛ ተናጋሪዎች፣ አፋር(ጠልጣል)፣አገው፣ሳሆ፣ኩናማ ወዘተ)ነው። የትግራይ መሬት በደቡብ አሌውሃ፣
በሰሜን መረብ ሲያካልሉት በምዕራብ ደግሞ ወልቃይትንና ጸለምትን ያጠቃልላል።

የተላሕት ድርጅታዊ መግለጫ፡ የካቲት 1968 ዓም (የመጀመሪያ እትም)

With this context, the ethnic groups were defined as per the physical boundaries stated in the manifesto and didn't include the whole of Afar, Agew, Kunama or Saho for if that was assumed then, it would mean claiming the Afar, Saho, Kunama and Tigriyan Eritreans on the other side of Mereb, and Afar and Agew under the historical administration of Wollo, and Shewa. If we subscribe to the narratives of the so-called territorial ambition of TPLF, we should find some shred of evidences of some sort:

1. In the teachings of TPLF, documents, organizational programs, military doctrines, administrative charters, political narratives etc: which are none and;
2. In the physical map of Tigray, i.e Tigray should be bigger at this time than any other time in its past history: which is not.

On both counts the mantra of “Abay Tigray” as howled by the ultranationalists fails to bear any meaning. One may blame TPLF for many things but not on this one. No such evidence is to be found in any of the forms stated above. And it always surprises me the audacity of these groups in passing judgments on issues they remotely know. TPLF's political ideals were really ideal. In TPLF, maps don't determine constituencies but the people define the maps. Its unequivocal stand on self determination attests to this evident truth. What comes first to the mind of the previous governments and their sympathizers are the land and the sea. It didn't matter whether that serves the best interest of the people. And for want of the land and sea, they lost everything and in the end exposed the oldest civilization on earth to a brink of eminent disintegration had it not been for the rescue by the astute leadership of EPRDF which TPLF served as the best political seed. Regarding the physical map of Tigray, the renowned Ethiopian scholar Dr. Ghelawdewos Araya had to state the following in one of his best interviews on Ethiopian Observer; verbatim “...*Tigray in the 17th century was four times the size of the present regional state of Tigray*” (emphasis mine)(http://www.tigraionline.com/ghelawdewos_araia_interview.pdf).

The issue here is not that these groups misrepresented TPLF in their quest to know it better with good intentions. Rather it is a strategy that brought about a web of political forces of all hues together to challenge the emerging realities in Ethiopia before they take roots. It's a character

assassination of the front and its leadership with a continuous deluge of political diatribe in a bid to deny it legitimacy in playing constructive role in the remaking of the Ethiopian state on the one hand and a deep-rooted hatred and anger to see it fail on the other. The political witchery in microcosm of the Eritrean ultranationalists can best be summarized in the following message of a certain Semere Tesfai's article posted on Awate.com in the wake of the untimely demise of the late PMMZ.

“Well, well, well... Why I'm I not surprised? Deki-Ere – it's happening again. History is in the making. It is a brand new day in Eritrea; and it is a dawn of a new era in Ethiopian politics. In Addis deep from its inner core, the ground is shifting along its geological fault lines. And as a result of this massive underground tremor, a brand new landscape is emerging in the Ethiopian political terrain. While the wind-vane on top of the newly formed landscape is decisively pointing south, Mekele is mute; and for a good reason. The Woyane revolution as a Tigrean ethnic revolution is buried with Meles Zenawi. Yes – the dream of Greater Tigray, the dream of Tigrean dynasty, the dream of independent Tigray nation state.... are all gone.... The Tigrean safety net: Article Thirty Nine is null and void. The Tigreans have crossed the Rubicon. Now, it is safe to say, the Tigreans are Ethiopians.”(Emphasis mine)(<http://awate.com/the-political-chess-game-to-tame-the-woyanes/>)

Eritrean intellectuals, save few, are known for their cheerleading prattles disconnected from the realities of today's Ethiopia and yesterday's TPLF. According to them, TPLF is a test tube specimen escaped from the folds of EPLF laboratories and if not contained sooner than later would plague the entire horn. In case you would like witness firsthand the height of shame those Eritreans have reached, visit the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict page at www.dehai.org/conflict if you have not done that so far.

Eritreans with rational faculty would have appreciated what Meles had contributed to their struggle for independence. He consistently upheld that the Eritrean question must be dealt boldly and let Eritreans had a say on their future and they did: risking the political ramifications to his career and the party he led. So was TPLF, unambiguously stood firm with regard to the self-determination of the Eritrean people. The connection of the death of Meles and the dawning of

“new brand day” in Eritrea is yet to be seen. Nine months down the line since that fateful moment, Eritrea is getting worst by each passing day while Ethiopia is striding in the positive linear scale much to the chagrin of ill-wishers. He has no inkling the “brand new terrain” he claimed being created as a result of the passing of Meles is a culmination of TPLF’s mounting struggle for years. The fact that the “wind-vane points decisively south” is the most Tigreans value and celebrate.

Tigreans fought for the noble causes enshrined in the constitution of FDRE and won. They believe their best guarantor is not this or that individual but the collective consent of the Ethiopian people and the prevailing accommodative political space. Tigreans are not fools to repeat the same mistakes the Shewa elites did commit. They did so not only because they are magnanimous people but also are wise enough to discern which is sustainable and which is not. Here lies the secret of the success of TPLF and its partners which is a piece of work to figure out to the likes of Semere. While the myriads of fronts and peoples parties gone into oblivion, TPLF progressively impacted even beyond its boundaries. The reason: it created a political coalition with least dynamics of contradictions on compromise and give and take principles. Systems always respond to contradictions and the dynamic range determines the chance of survivability. If the dynamic range is small which means least accommodative, sooner or later it explodes. But if the dynamic range is large enough and become inclusive of meaningful voices, it survives. It’s as simple as that.

Article 39 is not as such a safety valve for the state of Tigray. It can’t be because Tigray never opted for any alternative other than the unified Ethiopian state come rain or shine. But thanks to the misguided legacy of past regimes we had many Ethiopians relegated to second class citizens and were on their last leg to walk away from the union. This historic article redeemed that anathema and made prophesies of the political pundits remain unfulfilled. But what is in it that worried Semere Tesfai? Is it because some Eritreans are demanding the inclusion of similar article in case the Eritrean constitution sees the light of the day? My hunch tells me that they do. The precedent Ethiopia set in this regard has become an example to the conflict resolutions in Africa and Eritrea would not be an exception weather the ultranationalists would like it or not. I remind him that his gratuitous bliss would turn mordant as the fate of his Eritrea is fully in the hands of Isaias and indications are not that promising at all.

So where do the ideas of political extremists of the two sides meet? Well, both sides see Ethiopia through the prism of TPLF. Both sides create or exaggerate facts, make concerted endeavors in peddling rancor hoping that the Ethiopian people turn against each other in a way render power change in Ethiopia and much needed facelift to Eritrea.

According to these groups, in Ethiopia you have no EPRDF, government, federal states or partners. You have just a TPLF government and Tigray. You have TPLF army, police, courts, parliament, electoral board and civil servants. Neither the mosque nor the church is spared in this regard. What you have is not a pope or sheik but TPLF cadres in religious cladding preaching the primacy of the front at every religious processions and rituals. You will have always a TPLF prime minister whether he speaks Tigrigna, Welaytota or anything else. All others in the government ranks and the federal states are slaves with no inkling on how to run the affairs in their constituencies. At the back of every standing face at any level of the government, there you have Weyane (the synonym of TPLF) controlling every button and switch gear. If international partners happen to extend development grants, it is only to benefit Tigray and Weyane.

On the flip side, Isaias Afewerki is justified for holding his entire country men and woman in hostage because you have the “wicked expansion projects” of TPLF. According to this man and the ultranationalist goons in the Diaspora, Eritrea is under existential challenge posed by the “minority group” another variant often used interchangeably with “*kedemti*” (meaning servants) depending on whom they speak to: the former for external, and the later for domestic consumptions. Semer Tesfai’s claptrap is meant to buttress the unjustifiable actions of his boss by undermining the political federal experiment of Ethiopia. To do so this experiment has to fail. And the death of Meles is taken as a harbinger of that much hoped failure.

The bottom line is that both sides are holding the wrong end of the stick. The best for Eritrea is what TPLF had proposed circa 30 years ago: remain cooperative to the Ethiopian state in whatever forms (confederation or otherwise) and not antagonizing it which means but a willful act of suicide. The same goes to the Ethiopian extremists. They must recognize that the “good” old days are gone. Ethiopia is a nascent federal democratic state where TPLF can hardly have the leverage to impose its agenda on its people out of will and the spirit of cooperation. It is a no brainers to figure out that other members of the EPRDF coalition are as equally strong as that of TPLF even sometimes stronger which helps make a sound judgment on the political landscape of the homeland.

Meles's leadership of Ethiopia and EPRDF for far too long had to rest in his genius and political acuity rather than the dominance of TPLF. Given his singularity, he could have made it to the top being from any of the members of the coalition. In fact, I am of the opinion that it was a bad coincidence: being Tigrean and genius. Would the extremists have mind had he was from Amhara background? I can only guess: they wouldn't.

In conclusion, the mantra of the "Greater Tigray" is an agenda that never was. If it had life any time in the past, it must have been dead when TPLF launched the armed struggle. Though I am dead sure on that TPLF never upheld such objective to begin with, I would be glad if others shed light on the matter if it all was an agenda of Tigreans any time in their past history.