

The “Aquarian Conspiracy” and Ethiopian Public Discourse

The dictionary defines public discourse as “written and spoken communication” in public domains, such as conferences, meetings, literature, media, networks, organizations and any other public space used to transmit knowledge and information.

We have remained intoxicated with the rhetoric of both ruling EPRDF party and opposition discourses. In this piece, I want to look at informal discourses that are communicated through structures and processes existing outside of the elite-dominated (EPRDF/opposition) public domains: household, farm fields, social gathering, meeting places, bus stops, cafeteria, office corridors, on the phone, and so on. I want to see whether or how the perspectives and sentiments of ordinary people, for example, may influence perceptions of political and development issues in contemporary Ethiopian society. To address this issue, I borrow the notion of “Aquarian conspiracy” from the late American scholar Merilyn Ferguson (1980) who described how underground networks in America were conspiring (resisting, undermining and weakening) against dominant systems of knowledge, organizations, politics, corporate governance, etc. The conspirators were not just drawn from a single social class, such as workers, students or middle class social activists. They were composed of intellectuals, spiritualists, writers, workers, students, entrepreneurs, and so on., all united by the need to contemplate new societal aspirations, values, norms, individual roles, associational life, and so on.

In the Ethiopian context, the Aquarian conspirators are those Ethiopians who do not speak or write on public, yet they continue to transmit alternative narratives of experience and knowledge that challenge dominant public discourses. They can be composed of intellectuals, activists, professionals, ordinary men and women, former bureaucrats, civil society representatives, international observers and analysts and others. In the Ethiopian Diaspora, they are called “the silent majority”. Together, they produce alternative sentiments and perspectives on contemporary Ethiopian politics and development.

Below I provide examples including my own experiences. These examples can be speculative, subjective, generalized, personalized, etc, and I do not worry about qualifying their consistency with Merilyn Ferguson’s Aquarian conspiracy theory. I am more interested in giving you an idea of what kind of knowledge and information gets transmits through different settings available outside of elite dominated public domains. Here are the examples in no line of order:

I was in Gondar in 1991 (months after EPRDF seized power) taking a break from my university internship program in Kenya. My late father and I went to Arada bus station to catch a mini-bus only to find that there was a long line-up. In his 80s and irritated by his impaired vision (had cataracts), my father got impatient and decided to jump the queue. He started marching forward, holding my hand and dragging me behind. The young EPRDF soldier shouted, “Stop”. The old man shouted back “get out of my way”. The rebel soldier got out of his way. That way, we ended up holding the first (no. 1) spot on the queue. As the driver started the engine, my father frankly told the young soldier that he was “blind” and would need sufficient time to board the mini-bus. The soldier lowered his gun, the crowd obeyed and things moved slowly. I was self-conscious of the whole situation (jumping the queue) and very stressed, while my father took his seat

comfortably and said to me, “Don’t worry. They (the young rebels) are our children”. Times had indeed changed for good.

During one of those occasions of storytelling or experience sharing in small circles, I once told a small gathering how a group of EPRPs went around on April Fools Day in Gadaref, Eastern Sudan, to prank (fool) people: somebody slept with somebody’s lover; somebody’s friend died; somebody’s house (shelter) had burned down; EPRP entered Gondar; An American agency in Khartoum was transporting Ethiopians; Sudanese soldiers were coming to round up refugees; etc. Of course, we would later find out that those EPRPs were joking. We became ashamed and embarrassed, while the EPRPs (urban folks) laughed, laughed, laughed and laughed. This was basically my story. But, somebody in that small gathering intervened and contextualized (politicized) the story, that perhaps some elites and social groups remained unhappy in the post-Derge era, precisely because the “EPRDF system” have changed the structure of power and influence in Ethiopian society. Elites and groups that once established societal trends (ranging from April Fools, boogie dance, dying hair to defining public character and narrating history) no longer see themselves in “the new society”. In fact, you realize this phenomenon whenever you passed through the passport control at the Bole International Airport where the children of Ethiopian masses are in command and control or whenever you see them presenting documentaries and analyzing and reporting issues on Ethiopian TV. I think my late father might have been right: times have change for good.

EPRDF has been escorting retired civil servants to enter Kebele committees that make planning and budgeting decisions. In Gondar, two former civil servants told me that they had a unique experience in those committees, especially the way young Kebele officials were commanding organizational and financial power, compared with the past (in their time) when regional officials travelled all the way to Addis Ababa to ask for project money, if lucky. By narrating their disenchantment with the old system, these and other retired bureaucrats have helped to build the confidence of young regional and local officials in the current federal system of government.

A Canadian who worked with the Ethiopian government in the 1990s told me that he had once attended a human right workshop during the day, only to find the workshop animator (who was also head of a human rights organization) in a hotel later in the evening drunk and preaching that Ethiopia was in fact a Christian country (meant that there would be no religious equality). According to another credible source, the same workshop animator (whose name remains unanimous) had written a letter to Derge in the 1970s asking why the regime was not able to restore order (which justified more repression). EPRDF has always complained that some elements in the civil society sector have no genuine agenda of promoting democracy and human rights.

In ancient times (probably dating back 5,000 years), there had been a gradual climate change in Southern Arabia, leading to resource scarcities followed by successive phases of population immigrations to the East African region and Asian sub-continent. The descendants of those immigrants to East Africa now call themselves Afars, Tigreans, Amharas, Oromos, Agews, Gurages, Aderis, etc. The question, according to a young university student, is not who is and who is not an Abyssinian – as OLF contends. The question is which of these tribes had crossed

the Red Sea first to settle in East Africa and at approximately what time. This will capture the imagination of future generation historians and generate a passionate debate.

If you go to Gondar to visit the 17th century Palace, you will find tourist guides narrating how Oromo ruling elites had introduced innovation in Palace governance including ending gender segregation during state dinners and horse protocols. Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians, including thousands of young Oromos who go to Gondar as students and tourists, learn this history and become dismayed and disappointed with groups and individuals who say that Oromos have played no role in Ethiopian history. The same groups and individuals turn around to accuse EPRDF of encouraging Oromo's isolation from national society. Recently, I attended an event where a young Oromo singer sang and few people did what looked like a Gonderie-style eskista (shoulder dance). This suggests a cross-fertilization of cultures, not an isolation of Oromos.

Former Derge cabinet member Major Dawit Wolde Giorgis said (during an interview with a Diaspora TV) that EPRDF generals would go to international meetings with English translators - evidence of a professional gap. This then would make the Chinese, Israeli, Russian, Egyptian, French and generals of other countries who do not speak English incompetent. I brought this example to let you compare the generational difference in attitude and perception between the university student and tourist guides mentioned above and the old generation of elites like this Major and the reactionary "human rights" head mentioned earlier.

One of my Diaspora compatriots said to me that talking about EPRP politics had always been quite easy: secrecy, social democracy (the rhetoric) mischief (blaming others, not itself) and so on. This compares with the other opposition parties and groups that bring together revolutionaries, reactionaries, rich middle class, fanatic thugs, former Derge officials, former EPRDFs, former this, former that, so that Ethiopians spend more time trying to figure out who is who (screening personalities). EPRP is also still alive because of the "Aquarian conspiracy", not because of the work of its demoralized and divided aging leadership.

At a time when tens of millions of Ethiopians are struggling to escape poverty, we have Diaspora web sites (I counted 44 in a single web site link) posting information dedicated to promoting negative political discourse on Ethiopia. And rarely do they think that their contents can be accessed by Western government country desks (analysts) who brief officials on Ethiopia. The editor-in-chief of the Amharic Deutsche Welle program abandoned his Western culture of politeness to point out that some of the rhetoric in the Diaspora was "hateful". Instead of writing "responses" and "open letters" to this broadcaster, we should take his comments seriously.

A protest to denounce Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and other government officials on foreign soil (in the West) is an expression of a democratic right. But, this offends Ethiopians who do not understand why people in the Diaspora cause troubles for Ethiopian government leaders who go on business to Western countries. Ordinary people may not have the material wealth necessary to influence the opposition, but they have voting power.

A group of women were once watching a Tigrean dance presented by the Toronto-based Diaspora TV. One of them said, "Pah, without Tigreans, it just doesn't feel like Ethiopian".

The Hoover Dam in the US was the first dam in the world to be built with complex structures. Its construction during the 1930 recession, and its completion two years ahead of time, boosted American national moral, according to a TV documentary. Similarly, the Ethiopian Hedase Dam has come to symbolise the possibility of what was once perceived impossible. Ethiopians of all ages and income levels are contributing to the construction of the Dam. Meanwhile, Diaspora opposition groups say that this is another EPRDF political marketing strategy. Opposing the Hedase Dam has dire consequences, including being labelled as “Egyptian”.

Currently the Oromia region provides an economic growth success story for the East African region. The leaders of OPDO are ridiculed and condemned, while OLF (known for massacring innocent civilians) has been escorted by some opposition groups, writers, media lords including “intellectuals” who go on public to portray themselves as human rights advocates.

Sheik Al Moudi may be remembered for his entrepreneurial spirit, compassion and promoting the common good in Ethiopian society. He commands respect and admiration by Ethiopians at home and around the world. Yet, he gets little appreciation by many opposition groups; in fact, some groups have targeted him with character assassination.

I have encountered few donor officials who toured rural Africa and returned emotional about poverty issues. They could be stunned when people in the Ethiopian Diaspora, who use their immigrant status to claim rights of access to Western government social safety nets, ask donors to use aid as a political bargaining tool with the ruling party.

You may ask why I started out writing this piece neutral and ended up looking more like pro-EPRDF. Certainly, the revolutionary democrats are doing well. My concern is the opposition. As a first refugee generation of immigrant to North America, arriving in the 1980s, I have lived through the turmoil of Diaspora politics including reading mountains of material and attending countless formal and informal discussions. I have seen Diaspora opposition groups building up networks of influence, access elite material wealth and overrunning most of the Diaspora community organizations. Today the Diaspora opposition movement has lost its momentum. At home, too, political parties do not command influence among the younger generation of Ethiopians (majority of voters) who are well educated and better informed to make strategic policy choices. All this is often attributed to the political environment (e.g., ruling party policies and practices) which limits the effectiveness of opposition parties to articulate politics that inspires change. Whether it has been rigorously applied or not, I have employed the theory of “Aquarian conspiracy” to provide examples that show that popular sentiments and perspectives do not agree with the opposition discourse. This has implications.

Opposition politics should be inspired by popular sentiments and perspectives, not by foreign experiences of acquiring state power (e.g., Arab Spring). There is a need to move away from normative politics (“unity”, “history”, democracy, human rights, etc.) hoping to arouse nationalist sentiments and emotions, to focus on practical issues that affect Ethiopians: jobs, education, health, agriculture, public security, trade, technology, environment and so on. Reckless political behavior must be controlled, as it is a liability for the whole opposition movement. Positive public discourse inspires change and draws political support. If opposition

parties and groups continue to label their critics “ihadeg/EPRDF” and refuse to embrace new ideas, they would experience further political decadence and fade way from Ethiopian public arenas.

The Diaspora should keep up the present momentum of development activities to make 2012 another successful year of fund raising for the Hedase dam and similar development projects. Those of us who had a childhood experience of studying nighttime using candles would realize the importance of electricity in the daily lives of Ethiopians. A single fund raising event in a small Diaspora community could raise enough money to cover the cost of laying kilometers of electric cable or the cost of transporting a hydroelectric turbine from sea port to its destination. If you add up the impacts of all such small-scale efforts around the Diaspora, the contributions are significant. These events also bring together like-minded Diaspora Ethiopians to create organizations that promote cultural and commercial ties between Ethiopia and their host countries.

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