

On leadership and dissent

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Today the first generation of the EPRDF regime is packing out. Though in short notice, it appears that it has seized the opportunity to think about and somewhat appoint next generation of leaders. It also seems the next generation of leaders will have the rare privilege of being leaders and apprentices simultaneously. Surely, this condition did not decent without critical victories in the political, military, diplomatic and, above all, the economic arena. The favorable turning out of external events such as the anti terror alliance with the US, the rise of BRICS, etc. has also been useful.

Being devoid of these conditions, for example, the Eritrean government is unable to undergo such transition-even if it wanted to. So, the only choice left for it is to rationalize its predicament in the Fruedian “sour grape” analogy. The fox which can’t reach out the grape hanging over the three concludes that it must be sour. Accordingly, when dictators are asked about democracy, they say it is unnecessary in a given condition. There is also a flipside whereby potential dictators unable to mount to power misuse the term to name and shame their rivalry.

Today, sworn enemies of the EPRDF are weak, divided and humiliated. They are in a similar condition that Hobbes used to explain a pre-state condition, namely: “nasty, brutish and short”. But this is not their permanent condition. Just like the common cold-given the right circumstances, they might revive. Hence, the challenge is to prevent the country from their toxic exposure. The first measure is to identify the groups that are most vulnerable to their exposure. This means identifying not just where (rural/urban) but also who most of our people are.

Ethiopia has always been a country of young people. Over the last two decades, the Ethiopian population grew roughly from 51 to 90 million. The post Derg generation can thus be estimated at 40 million. The oldest young man in this cohort can now be expected to be in his senior years at one of the universities. Even when we include every age in Ethiopia, we have a median age of 16.8 years-again showing that most Ethiopians are young people. This reality has not changed from 1980s. Even during that period, Ethiopia's median age was roughly 17 years.

The EPRDF is accustomed to classifying the population into rural and urban. It thus craft its policy based on this template. This template has its own merits. Beneath this broad classification, however, there is a critical factor of age which must be seriously pondered. One mistake the Haile Sellassie regime made was to undermine its youth. The imperial regime entertained an outdated notion that a bunch of young pedantic pen pushers could not possibly shake the elite city Royal Guards and feudal lords in the rural corners. The Derg didn't undermine the youth but treated them with contempt-hence, venturing to dry out the ocean of youth in vain.

If EPRDF is to breath in the new era, it has to be reincarnated among the youth generation. If EPRDF is to be reincarnated among the youth, it must attract their attention and arouse their interest. When the TPLF was beginning its struggle, it appealed to the young Tigrean masses not only politically but also culturally. By virtue of these attributes, young Tigreans lay down their lives for the cause which ultimately hit the right target. During this time, however, it was easy for the TPLF leadership to approach the young population because they were also young. Today's challenge is to approach the youth not by accident but by intent. In this respect, the distance the old EPRDF can advance is very limited. It can only reach out to a handful of young people who then advocate EPRDF among the young 40 million.

There is indeed a lot the EPRDF can learn from the incumbent generation. Nevertheless, they must use this privilege sparingly lest they end up dependent on their mentors. Young EPRDF leaders should redefine Ethiopian reality of 2025 and onward, compete and win among their fellow compatriots in the political playing field. They must redefine what the most contentious issues in Ethiopia's economic and sociopolitical arena will be in 2025. The most contentious issues of 1990s such as Article 39, Eritrea, Ethnic Federalism, etc, have phased out. The most contentious issues of the early 20th Century like party tehadso, election debacle and transformation will serve their end in due course. The challenge for them, therefore, is to forecast future actors, issues and solutions. Nobody can portray the future in a crystal clear mode. But everybody can paint alternative scenarios based on current events and forecast with some degree of confidence. This is simple statistical principle scientists use to predict the weather, analyze market, test drugs, etc.

These days, it is even possible to simulate alternative scenarios and see what happens after a given time using computer programs. The most important thing is to admit dynamism. Everything is dynamic. For example, today Ethiopia has a very small volume of middle class population. It also has a relatively small proportion of urban population. Given the level of economic developments that we now see today, what these variables look like in 2020 or 2025? If the middle class and urban population expand, it will require greater accommodation in the political playing field. How can this legitimate demand get properly treated?

With careful foresight, even vague variables like national politics and international relations could impart their secret. For example, in the 1990s, the EPRDF spent most of its time trying to erect ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. Ten years later this foundation has been consolidated. The debate surrounding that political alignment is now simmering down. Today's economic development will surely intertwine the people-not only on sentimental slogans and dances but also on concrete economic and sociopolitical interests. Given this conditions, i.e., fast economic development, strong political base what is the next challenge might lie on managing this relation productively. On the

international arena, today, are signs of Ethiopia appearing in some important regional, continental and global arenas. The more it reaps benefit from international relations the more it is expected to secure its interests abroad. When that time comes, the young generation should have the confidence and wisdom to bargain in the global arena and bring fruitful results. This requires competent knowledge of the dynamic reality and culture of different people. For example, if China will play greater role in the future, young Ethiopians should carefully study Chinese history, language and culture today. Similarly, if Ethiopians are expected to play a leading role in the East African community, they must seek to build strong social capital with their neighbors by studying in neighboring countries and mastering Arabic and Kiswahili. These are only sample of causality that only the young generation of EPRDF should contemplate. At this point, there is one bigger factor that plays a crucial role-i.e., science and technology.

All of the above can be achieved only for those young people who will have no difficulty mastering new technology. In the future, laptops will be old school. In the future, micro chips will be installed in everything-making every equipment smart –hence, demanding every operator to be smarter. The young generation must be ready to step up to this challenge of not just operating but replicating and inventing.

The current generation of the EPRDF might support this path but it can't supervise it. This has to be the task of the second cohort of the EPRDF which is due to take power after few years. The upcoming generation of EPRDF leadership must begin cultivating its third generation from the outset. It should embark on a mission of amazing a critical mass of leadership from the young generation. The only way for the EPRDF to be sustainable is by institutionalizing its party. Institutions create organizational culture and dissolve personal cult. The secret behind the TPLF success in the armed struggle was the fact that it had a critical mass of leaders within fairly the same age cohort. This is a fortunate accident which must be replicated with intent. Under this condition,

sudden death of a key leader will not unleash massive havoc. The party will be able to weather unforeseen and inevitable losses of key leaders by swiftly installing new ones.

Lessons must be derived not only from rosy democracies but also from gloomy dictatorships- including our own. Imagination must not be curbed on account of political correctness. Accordingly, here are examples of collective leadership as opposed to absolute dictatorship in and out of Ethiopia in different eras. The foreign cases of age old political parties in the West and the Chinese “two leaders-two terms” cycles are manifest. But the example of Egypt is not so obvious. Nasser and Sadat were in the same cohort, so when Nasser died, Sadat was already ready. However, Sadat wisely enough made the move to pick Mubarak from the younger generation. So, when he was killed, Mubarak filled the gap. Mubarak didn't appreciate this team-work-and ended up being humiliated. The Mbeki-Zuma team was picked by Mandela who was already contemplating retirement on the spot he became a president. Unfortunately, Mbeki and Zuma didn't make it. Yet, Zuma was ready to take over.

In Ethiopia's dictatorship history, the Derg was a team of young officers. Gen. Aman was not part of that cohort-so, despite his popularity among the masses, he was easily deposed by the young cohort. When Gen. Aman died, Col. Teferi took power with less bloodshed-still he was older. And when Col. Teferi was killed, Mengistu took power without a mounting threat to the Derg regime. Mengistu was 32 years old and had enough comrades to back him up. But as soon as Mengistu begun to alienate his comrades and took absolute power, he became lonely and paranoid. Hence, when he fell, he took down the Derg regime along.

The same pattern applied on the Shoa Empires of Menilik and Haile Sellassie. When it comes to ruling over non-Shoan nobility, Menilik was centralized. Most outsiders recognized only this aspect to Menilik's rule. But, when it comes to ruling over his own family, Menilik was liberal. He let his wife, cousins and those close to him mount military operations in other regions, reign over them and build their own power. Neither Tewodros nor Yohannes did this. Tewodros centralized

everything, Yohannes decentralized everything. So, when they died in battle, their regimes crumbled alongside them. They directly confronted every challenge, took every risk and faced the ultimate consequence (along with their kingdoms).

Menilik also fought wars, but he fought together with his cousins and other nobilities. Hence, he shared the risk and burden. Unlike his predecessors, he died not in battle but in bed. But his Shoa empire outlasted him until 1975. When Menilik died, his family members (including the young generation) were ready to take over. Just like the Derg debacle, with minimum bloodshed, Teferi Mekonnen was crowned at last. Just like Mengistu, Emperor Haile Selassie didn't appreciate the virtue of collective leadership. He slowly distanced himself from his family members and cultivated technocrats from the middle ranking nobility elsewhere by empowering them with education. The Tahsas coup was a signal that this children of modern military, higher education and civil service were no longer interested in absolute monarchy. But the Emperor ignored this sign only to be humiliated after a decade. Unlike Menilik (and like Mengistu), Haile Selassie's demise also culminated the demise of the Shoan Empire.

Today, Prime Minister Meles is lucky to have a team of leaders in his cohort. Unfortunately, his personal gravity is attracting attention. This attention from uninformed and arrogant elements would not amount much. But the attention of young supporters is not something the EPRDF should be tempted to embrace. If the organization is to survive, it must clean itself from personal cult as we see today in Russia and adopt faceless bureaucracy in China and the West. In fact, the secret behind the TPLF's success is partly due to the fact that many nameless chairmen run the organization and left without attracting much attention. It appears the EPRDF, including Mr. Meles has chosen the party over the person. This is a serious blow for EPRDF haters as it transforms itself into a meritocratic engine.

The coming generation should collaborate with the current leadership in producing a third generation of EPRDF leadership. The EPRDF should become an institution having critical mass of intergenerational leaders (that represent all age cohorts) selected based on merit (education, tested ability and work ethic). This will make it impervious not only to senile threats left by the Imperial regime (Shabia, Shabab, Oneg, Arbegna, etc.) but unforeseen yet more potent dangers that may spring from the EPRDF-era youth that is quietly assuming strength. This generation is well versed with EPRDF's strength and weakness and more in tune with the tandem revolutions driven by democracy, globalization and technology. Just like the youth of the 70s, this generation has enormous potential to lead the country to glory or ruin.

The EPRDF has to be careful not to suffocate this generation while trying to block past dregs stuck in guerilla warfare of the 70s and 80s. The EPRDF must not block the young generations' inherent demand for voice, opportunity and freedom. The major of these entail freedom of expression, education and employment. The swift development will address most of these problems. However, democracy can't be addressed via economic development. The Ethiopian youth should feel a sense of belongingness in politics and empowerment. Every youth should not and can't be expected sign for EPRDF's youth league.

If the EPRDF transforms the youth into an army, it will decay and crumble. It must not trade quality for quantity. It has to be an organization which attracts merit and repeals mediocrity. The best people must apply to be members rather than the party pressuring everyone to join in. Meanwhile, political dissent should be encouraged. The EPRDF must shake off its allergy to blind opposition. A careful analysis of dissent serves as a safety valve to relieve one's weakness. Doing well in the economy is not an excuse to ban freedom. EPRDF should learn from China's strength as well as weakness. Opposition political parties should be seen as instruments to attract supporters to the EPRDF. The EPRDF knows that most of its ardent supporters, especially in Tigray are so primarily

because of the toxic opposition which promotes anti-Tigrean sentiments. It must expand this circle to include all Ethiopians who are fed up with opposition sentiments against: Abay Dam, against Shabab's offensive, against agriculture, against foreign aid/alliance, against government regulated economy, etc.

To sum up, the coming generation of rulers must prepare a third generation. A critical mass of intergenerational leadership will institutionalize the EPRDF and make it impervious to opposition forces, personal cult and generational change. This, however, also means that EPRDF should be careful not to hurt the youth by blocking their inherent desire to utilize their pent up potential-whose realization depends on level and safe playing field. By and large, the EPRDF has the capability to neutralize its current rivals, the challenge lies in neutralizing sources of toxic opposition in the future whose seeds can "only" be sown and grown by the current youth inside Ethiopia today.