

MESSAY KEBEDE'S  
STALEMATE & POWER SHARING  
A Satirical Response

Dr. Messay Kebede has suddenly turned into a man with a scary vision, bordering, as it were, on the nightmare. Alone he sees a specter haunting Ethiopia in the guise of a tense political stalemate. A frightening impasse to boot, which if unaddressed, could explode into a mass-incinerating hellfire. Who will not be unnerved when a man of his background, who knows a thing or two about 'frightfulness and terror', warns us that, '*What is likely is not the Egyptian situation of the army refusing to shoot demonstrators, but the Libyan or Syrian scenario of bloody confrontation and civil war.*' Precisely when in this prophesy the bottom is to fall apart is not clear even to Messay, a philosopher turned fortuneteller. But in his new-found capacity, he has no doubt about his privileged access to 'evidence of things unseen.' A small wonder, then, that he claims to clearly see the shadows cast by the terrible tidings to come --- full of tumult and fury, though resilient, Ethiopia may not endure.

In any capacity, Messay is not a man who does things by half. At Addis Ababa University he was not content with delivering lectures on the superior virtues of Soviet Communism. He made sure the doctrine was properly applied down at the Keble level --- a small-scale Gulag. Similarly as a seer incarnate, he not only senses calamity from afar, but also conjures up the means to deflect it. His evenhandedness, we must admit, nicely resonates with the cryptic Amharic saying: *The deity does not rush to quarrel before throwing a banquet.* (ሳ ይ ደ ግ ስ አ ይ ጣ ላ ም ) Thus, Messay not only discerns an otherwise imperceptible political hemorrhage, he also claims to poses a unique power and knowledge to unlock it. He assures us that we too, who have neither, could cut the Gordian knot of our political entanglement, like his predecessor Aristotle's pupil did during antiquity. The sooner we take him seriously therefore the better, for a higher power may well be speaking through him. Whereas, doubt at this juncture could cost us precious time, and end up dragging us into stateless conflagration. But, if Messay is passionate about Ethiopia as he claims he is, he won't let us drown. Why, he has even worked out the details of how we can unpack the political deadlock we are in. And save ourselves from a tragedy, which in our indulgent complacency, we might not have seen coming. Never mind that not all of us are agreed on the direness of what the error of our politics has in store for us. But Messay insists that he can sense what is coming and warns us that there is only one way out of the predicament that we have been caught unawares. And that is, as he puts it, through and only through a conciliatory political arrangement. Instantly Kafka's '*The Trial*' comes to mind where the narrative build-up to the verdict grips the reader with nail-biting anxiety without even a scant curiosity, nay, indifference to what the trial is all about in the first place.

Messay too would have us panic beyond our wits. And take his forecast for granted without posing to even think for a moment if ours might not be a

kneejerk reaction. Who can fault us given the breathtaking enormity of the implications of his prophesy? Only, if any, those with nerves of steel among us could stop and probe whether what Messay is eager to shield us from is real or fantasy. As we read his text further, *A Personal Manifesto*, as he prefers to call it, (perhaps as a final farewell tribute to his former ideological icons) we become even more disheartened by the magnitude of the peril upon us. Why shouldn't we be? Considering that the options he leaves us with is either to resign to our fate. Or pin our hopes on his crisis-prevention magic spell. Lest we further sink into an even deeper despair, however, he lifts our spirits with kind words of hope. He assures us that all is not lost, after all, as there is light at the end of the tunnel. What is only needed is that those who matter most heed his advice. Self-assured, Messay is even willing to risk his reputation on the accuracy of his bleak forecast and the preventive efficiency of his game-changer of a proposal. Nevertheless, as the bet has a Faustian ring to it, it is doubtful that those he addresses himself to would lend him ears. 'We the people', on the other hand, though initially taken aback, should, nonetheless, have reason to feel up-beat about our prospect and owe Messay gratitude for it. Not least for letting us in on the good news that there might, after all, be redemption in the end. What is required of us poor souls, it seems, is pray that almighty give our political leaders the courage to strike a deal and deliver us from evil.

Be that as it may, what is this magical remedy that, on Messay's considered opinion, could save us from being sucked into an infernal political vortex? And how does this mother- of- all- deterrents work to ward off such a dire threat which he alone, thanks to his unique power of intuition, sees with crystal-ball clarity? Well, according to our US-based seer, one thing has to be done if this national disaster (otherwise unavoidable) is to be averted. By some fiat, as it were, Messay suggests that, regardless of how it came about and irrespective of its legitimacy, the current lopsided power configuration has to be radically realigned. By some circuitous scheme political power, he insists, has to be evenly divided between the EPRDF and an unnamed opposition in Ethiopia. Less than that, he reckons, nothing will do. For the root cause of this phantom-like stalemate, in Messay's judgment, largely lies in the asymmetry of our polity's power-distribution. It is this anomaly, then, which he believes can explain:

The tangible repressive tendency of the regime after the 2005 election (which) has forced opposition forces and leaders to opt either for an armed conflict, with all the uncertainties that are attached to this form of struggle, or pursue a peaceful struggle whose success depends on Meles's guarantee of democratic rights, which, I believe, is no longer likely.

Obviously he is least troubled that no rivalry between two hugely unequal contenders, as the incumbent and the opposition are, can cause a ripple. Let alone a paralytic political stalemate which he believes that only he can diffuse. That is why he offers his prescription unperturbed by any possibility of misdiagnosis on his part. Or any doubt that the *clear and*

*present danger* that he is so eager to forestall, might neither be clear nor present, in the first place. Yet still he has even readied a warning label to his solution. It reads that his formula works best if the contenders summon their moral courage to put country before power and glory. Since, as the saying goes, all is well that ends well, in this manner Messay tells us that his tale of trial and tribulation, woven as it is from of his own figment of imagination, can come to a happy ending. One cannot fail to be intrigued by the indeterminate note with which Messy leaves us. Granted unlike a political practitioner who is constrained by the objective limits of the possible, a fiction writer has the privilege to end his story in any way that captures his fancy. But in a postmodern gesture of abdication of authorial authority, Messay invites us, his audience, to write the final ending of his script ourselves. That is to say, given the open-endedness of his conclusion we could either choose to follow his advice and rejoice at a happy ending. Or ignore him and face the consequences of a tragic *cul-de-sac*. Whichever of the two binary options we take, praise to Messay, it will at least be our decision. To this extent, unlike a Keble revolution guard (አብዮት ጠባቂ), Messay has spared us a tormenting existentialist 'either/ or' dilemma.

Satirical though at times this rendition is, it nonetheless captures the gist of what we have to contend with where Messay's 'Personal Manifesto' is concerned. A kind of desiderata, if you will, which has, no doubt, been received with mixed reviews amid debate on the merits and demerits of its content. More, of course, has been written since on Messay's Manifesto, albeit with uneven levels of clarity. One more reaction paper might, therefore, be considered as one too many. Nonetheless, since, to the extent possible, we have tried to avoid repeating what has already been said, our readers might hopefully bear with us as we expound our view on the subject.

With that said, it is useful to provide a schematic rehearsal of Messay's central contention to set the tone of our rejoinder. As those who have carefully read Messay's paper will recall, his entire theory is premised on one presupposition. Namely that, though few Ethiopians are aware of it, the country today is, nonetheless, precariously tittering on a political knife edge. Barring Messay, no one knows how this impasse might play itself out. Mind you, this is not just another deadlock which occasionally occurs in parliamentary democracies when competing parties fall short of the required vote to pass, or, kill a contentious bill. Obviously, as on several instances in the past, such a standoff is often quietly resolved by a win-win compromise without any undue alarm. And, no sooner the deal is made than the business of governing returns to normal, and from thereon, as they say, it is business as usual. Though invisible to ordinary mortals, what Messay sees in Ethiopia, on the other hand, is a far graver political malaise. If, God forbid his offer is ignored, the political time-bomb whose clock he alone can hear ticking, could at any time go off and plunge the country into the abyss of a civil war.

Thus, after he lays out this manifestly imaginary stalemate as an irrefutable ground and solid premise, Messay proceeds to the second stage. Against the backdrop of unexplained starting point, he begins to trace the genesis of the present explosive volatility in Ethiopia's post-2005 political trajectory. But when the going gets tough blanket statements are often thrown about, partly to compensate for lack of coherence. And partly to provide warrant for his otherwise preconceived conclusion. It is only then that he unravels the moral ground, the political incentives and the personal reasons which he reckons might motivate the political actors to end the stalemate they are and thereby avoid a showdown. Obviously the public would be relieved when it finally realize, after the fact, of course, the danger it was in, had Messay not come to its rescue. Finally, in a solemn declaratory tone, he concludes by retreating that it is only by a coalition government that the approaching doomsday can be thwarted.

To his credit, Messay instantly recognizes that such a back door brokered compromise where citizens have no say in the matter, could well be undemocratic. Yet, again in a detached poise often associated with accomplished philosophers, he reminds us that there is no one single road to democracy: But several, no, many each with its own merit that every country has to choose for itself. Not least is, of course, (like the road to hell) the path which he claims to have paved for Ethiopia with good intentions. A road no doubt that the quicker taken the better Ethiopia's chances of avoiding a catastrophe and arriving safely at a stable liberal democracy. Such, then, is in a compressed summery the pivotal coordinates of Messay's contention which sparked animated response from both sides of the political divide.

Our task now is to juxtapose an alternative reading to Messay's account, paraphrasing when necessary his arguments, to see if his central contention and power-sharing formula can still stand. A word of caution is perhaps apt here. Since Messay's analytical progression is interspersed with unexplained sweeping commentary, his argumentation is not always easy to follow. What compounds the challenge is that the punch lines not only lack illustrative support, but in key places his unit of analysis shifts, switching from the institutional to the personal, from the emotive to the objective, with no justifiable reason. Fortunately, the part where he lays out his premise is less marred by such snags. It does not, however, strangely enough, appear in the opening pages. But, somewhere towards the end of the 11- page-long text that one has to patiently read to locate. It is, therefore, with Messay's premise that we must begin by a direct quote which contains his point of departure.

My contention is that the Ethiopian situation precisely exhibits a political stalemate, itself fraught with dangerous possibilities.... What is likely is not the Egyptian situation of the army refusing to shoot demonstrators, but the Libyan or Syrian scenario of bloody confrontation and civil war.

There you have it! No one knows through what ‘precisely’ tainted prism Messay sees Ethiopia, but as far as he can tell “*the Ethiopian situation precisely exhibits a political stalemate... Now, all dictionaries define stalemate as a ‘situation in a competition in which neither side is able to win or make any progress.’*” Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury! Does this in any way or remotely reflect the actual existing political situation in Ethiopia today? We should certainly hope not. For the reality on the ground cannot be any more different than night and day. Not even the shallowest member of the opposition parties in Ethiopia believes that any of these organizations has what it takes to lock the country in this kind of political stalemate which Messay swears by against all evidence to the contrary. At any rate, had it been one of those semi-illiterate Diaspora charlatans who braved this pitiful appraisal of the situation in Ethiopia, one could understand --- as nothing better can be expected from the lunatic fringe in the Diaspora. But coming as it did from Messay—a certified philosopher—one can’t help but cringes with embarrassment as he is held in high esteem among his peers. Perhaps, we would have felt differently had Messay been talking in these brazenly hyperbolic terms about the 2005 post-election political impasse.

As it will be recalled, at least then there was a serious deadlock which could have potentially snowballed into uncontrollable lawlessness. Indeed the offshoot was a showdown, which dented the country’s fledgling democracy. In consequence the chief contender became collateral damage, as it were, as almost all its leaders were unceremoniously dispatched from the political arena into oblivion. Ever since then, of course, the opposition could never give a good account of itself. Neither at the political stage nor in the extra-political terrain could the opposition hold its ground. In fact, amid internal bickering, the nosiest left the country. Adding to the misfortune, every one of the opposition MPs were, sad as it is, voted out of parliament. Needless to say, this political meltdown came about following EPRDF’s 2010 landslide election victory, where in so many words, the electorate told the whole world how it feels about many of the opposition leaders. Lest the message was lost on no one, the voting population promptly staged huge nationwide rallies, celebrating the outcome of the vote on the very morrow of the ballot day. Understandably, Messay neither recognizes nor acknowledges that the Ethiopian people have a lot more to be sanguine about. Though his article extensively dwells on development and the development state, he says nothing about the country’s achievements on this front. No doubt, his is not an unintended oversight compounded by paucity of information. For evidence abound regarding the positive attitudinal impact the impressive economic growth has had on the general population. Few indeed can dispute the widespread public hope in a better future generated by that the country’s promising development rate. Herein, then, lies the mystery why Messay is silent on the most visible feature of the country’s socio-economic landscape. Otherwise, he himself would have exposed the fallacy of his Libyan analogy.

Though unbecoming for a man of his age and educational credentials, Messay could, for all one cares, embarrass himself by touting fantasy for reality. But the fact remains that there is no countervailing force in Ethiopia today that can checkmate the ruling party to a standstill. Not in parliament, not in the larger public sphere, not even at the ever-narrowing margin of weak state-presence. In a word, nowhere is there an organized political rival that can slow, much less stop the EPRDF from governing as it sees fit within the limits of the law. Or, prevent it from implementing any of the party's policies ratified by parliament. Consider, if you will, the mandate the EPRDF has, thanks to its rapid-development platform on which it run and won a landslide victory in the 4<sup>th</sup> round national ballot. Couple this with the enthusiastic public reception of the outcome of the election up and down the country. What dissenting party can, for instance, stand in the way of, say, the Growth and Transformation Plan and expects to survive public backlash? Discounting Messay, no one can also deny the nationwide jubilant reception of the *Hedasse* Dam project considered by all as the jewel of the GTP.

Surly the month-long series of pro-*Hedasse* mass rallies bears this out. Only Messay seems to mistake this groundswell public outpour of support for a clear sign of the inevitability of an Arab-like revolt. Why else would he be so certain as to write: *What is likely is not the Egyptian situation of the army refusing to shoot demonstrators, but the Libyan or Syrian scenario of bloody confrontation and civil war.* Obviously Messay is one of those who until recently saw a flicker of hope in the Arab revolt. Who can blame him for this self-delusion when nothing seems to indicate that the EPRDF is running out of steam? The desperate too felt and hoped that Ethiopia would be the next to fall in 'the concatenation of the Arab revolt', to borrow Perry Anderson's description. Messay in particular relished the possibility. For he thinks that Ethiopia has been in a state of political stalemate since 2005. Long, that is, before North Africa went into flames. But, luckily his reading is off the mark by a huge margin. Doubtless otherwise, Addis Ababa should by now have been the first city in black Africa to go up in smoke.

Not, however, for lack of desire to ignite an Arab-like uprising through face-book agitation among the new breed of EWP recidivists. The socially rootless social-media barricaders had certainly planned to organize an angry mass rally, code named, BEKA! However, to hide their tiny public appeal, the twitters cleverly timed their revolt to coincide with no less May 20--- a day reserved for a celebratory public gathering as much to mark the end of dictatorship as to commemorate the advent of democracy. True enough, on this day, as in all cities, an unprecedented mammoth crowd assembled at Addis Ababa's Meskel Square. Much to the disappointment of the clandestine riot organizers, however, not a single anti-government slogan was heard in any of the rallies held throughout the nation's cities. To the contrary, what stood out was an array of countless colorful placards and banners that, among other thing, read, 'Enough to Poverty!' More noteworthy was the deafening roar of expressions of support to the GTP

amid rhythmic chants of mass donation-pledges to the construction of the great Nile Dam.

Perhaps if we substitute Kenya for Ethiopia, Messay's prognosis might have something to recommend it. For in the aftermath of the 2007 election, Kenya sunk into a prolonged stalemate which was only resolved by a power-sharing arrangement between the competing parties. In Ethiopia, on the other hand, neither the political reality nor public sentiment reflects a condition commonly associated with political stalemate. Yet Messay believes that the situation could in fact potentially implode into a bloodbath. As he is adamant on this point, one can never overstate how, by any dispassionate assessment, the situation cannot be any more discrepant than his flawed appraisal suggests. Neither can one overemphasize that only those with limited political aptitude expect a Maghreb-like revolt to explode in Ethiopia at the present juncture or at any point in the immediate future. How could it be otherwise under a climate where the whole country is responding favorably to all government initiatives, including the current savings campaign associated with the floating of the *Hedasse* Dam construction bond? Admittedly, in countries like Ethiopia there is no telling what the future holds. Nonetheless, though imperfect, reason is the best guide for those of us with no extra sensory-powers to gauge the future. As explained above, the kind of mass revolt that Messay thinks is lurking beneath the surface, therefore, is most unlikely. Not at any rate, when even those who can barely make ends meet, are volunteering to give the little they have to help government meet its grand financial goal.

Granted, though Messay does not mention it (but soon others will) there is at present a high inflation rate, which is particularly hard on those who live on fixed-income. Granted there are pockets of drought-stricken areas where the vulnerable need urgent relief. Granted too there is today a tight tax-collection policy directive. One which, coupled with needles bureaucratic red tape, is, understandably irking the business community. Now, what of these challenges? Should they be construed as manifestations of a dead-end scenario which the government is helpless to address? Should we, therefore, accept Messay's power-sharing formula lest, as he warns us, we find ourselves in a: "*Libyan or Syrian scenario of bloody confrontation and civil war*"? Again our response has to be an unequivocal, No! Doubtless these challenges are real, but can and must be addressed sooner than later. Nonetheless, no stalemate, ineluctable or otherwise, has surfaced as a result of these difficulties or in consequence of any of the challenges the country encountered since 2005. In disarray as it is, the opposition, for instance, has no remedy for any of these issues. Not even a quick fix around which it could, temporally at least, mobilize public discontent and bring the government to the negotiation table.

Conversely, despite inflation, drought, or bureaucratic bottlenecks, no segment of the society is today ready or inclined to engage in action that could result in a violent political confrontation. Far removed as Messay is from the seen, he has no idea how Ethiopians are shocked by the

bloodshed in Libya. The mere mention of such a possibility, which conjures up disturbing memories of the Red Terror, is chilling to most Ethiopians. Messay could be pardoned for not being in sync with the times, which partly explains his insensitivity. But the analogy he draws to promote his pet political project might not absolve him from reproach: Particularly, since he lays claim to an intellectually nuanced understanding of how politics work in this country. It is inexcusable indeed that, given his academic learning, that he should be so vague on the pattern of collective political behavior in Ethiopia. Messay of all people should know that this country has a solid state culture marked, for good or worse, by deep reverence to political authority. Succinctly put, Ethiopia is not a country which can easily be dragged into a violent civil strife. For those with little patience for Ethiopian history, 2005 should be a good reminder how the Ethiopian people turn a deaf ear to incitement to senseless mob violence. What the so-called independent think tanks and NGOs, which Messay seems to rely on, cannot understand is that, collective political behavior in Ethiopia cannot be pigeonholed into a readymade paradigm. For instance, it takes more than price hike or an alleged contraction of political space before Ethiopians plunge themselves into a violent convulsive rage. Perhaps Messay would relate to this point better if we were to put it in Leninist terms. Assuming, of course, he has not unwisely jettisoned at least the salutary lessons that he must have learned from the founding father of Bolshevism. In a nut shell, what we are driving at here is that, (as Lenin would have put it) there is neither an objective nor a subjective condition for a civil war in Ethiopia. Messay could endlessly set the specter of violent turmoil as a straw man to scare us into accepting his self-serving proposal. The fact of the matter, however, is that there is no economic or political ground for any large-scale 'violent confrontation' in this country.

If such, then, is the objective situation, why does Messay insist to the contrary. A satisfactory explanation cannot be found in the objective situation in Ethiopia. One has to scan the history of the opposition's political response from day one of the fall of Mengistu's regime for a better clue. As it will be recalled, no sooner the ethnic-based federal order was founded than prophecies about government collapse became the driving force behind the anti-EPRDF campaign. This state of affairs continued to inspire many, particularly among the opposition in the Diaspora, until the 1998- 2000 Ethio-Eritrean war. For five years or so, thanks partly to the nationwide fraternal solidarity spurred by Eritrean aggression, facile rambling about Ethiopia's disintegration subsided. After this brief lull, however, predictions of regime change gained a powerful momentum in the wake of the 2005 post-election crisis. At this stage, forecast of EPRDF's collapse was so certain that to think otherwise was considered madness. Recall, for instance, the excitement that followed the 2005 crisis among opposition fundraisers, lobbyists, pamphleteers, political talk-show hosts, Red-Terror fugitives etc, in the West. Most, in fact, had begun packing their belongings for a triumphant homecoming that was obviously never to be. That too passed and all was quite on the Western front. But just as all seemed to be lost, the true believers saw in the Arab revolt a providential sign of the approaching hour of the fulfillment of the prophecy. A day of

reckoning for Woyane, as it were, which they had been eagerly waiting for two long decades. It is at this stage, then, that Messay joined the pantheon of fortunetellers. He made his *début* with a stern warning to the powerful elect, admonishing them to share power with their rivals. And thereby avoid a terrible misfortune that might otherwise prove impossible to prevent. Alas, wishful thinking as all this is all about, more need not be said. It is apt now to end this part of the discussion here. In the sequel, we shall examine what Messay thinks the motivation is for the parties in conflict to forge a coalition government. Though from a diametrically opposite angle and purpose, Tesfaye Demmellash has ably articulated this question in his response to Messay's Manifesto. He too, however, can't resist making predictions of EPRDF's downfall every so often. This is partly because, despite his postmodernist flare, Tesfaye cannot come to terms with the fact that the politics of recognition is today a global agenda. And a legitimate organizing principle of politics in its own right. Dismissing it as he does so often, as tribalism which draws from colonial discourse only betrays his conservative political disposition. Apparently it is from this unexamined instinct that his entire objection to the nationality-based federalism steams. At any rate, when the time comes, we shall have to justify this critical observation of Tesfaye's beef with the Meles government. For the purpose at hand, however, it is useful to quote from his latest posting as an entry point for our next discussion.

The Meles government is on top of Ethiopian national affairs, "looking down" on weak, ineffectual opposition groups, facing not much threat to its rule, at least not so far. What would be the motivation of its supreme leader in seeking compromise with opposition parties? Why would he be willing to negotiate himself and his party out of hegemonic power as Messay suggests he could and should? .

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