

The Politics of Guilt

From Zelalem Berhanu

Introduction

A few months ago, I heard about an Ethiopian 'political activist' from the Diaspora who insulted the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and declared that, "Ethiopians do not want food, they want their rights". Later, I observed this person being 'honored' for his 'heroic' acts among his crowd. To my surprise, he was even given a chance to speak about his 'heroic act' during a Sunday prayer at an Ethiopian Orthodox Church based in the United States.

I wanted to ask this person and his crowd if they understand that 'getting food' is a fundamental human right. I thought of arguing with them by telling them that 'getting food' at this time is not only an utmost priority for all our rights but also an achievement that takes away our shame and proudly allows us to retain our dignity. I wanted to tell them that Meles' fight, indeed the key fight of Ethiopians, is producing enough food and making it accessible to the poor.

However, I later discovered that such an argument does not make any sense, as the basis for discussion is not in place. You do not discuss the actions of a psychopath in order to convince him to change. The problem of those actions is not based on logic and argument but on mental disorder.

This prompted me to write this note with the hope that other professionals from the discipline of psychology will scrutinize this article and even give it more substance.

The Politics of Guilt

The Cambridge Advanced Dictionary defines 'guilt' as a feeling of anxiety or unhappiness that you have; because, you have done something wrong such as causing harm to another person in your past. It also elaborates guilt as a feeling of bitterness where you feel angry and unhappy because you cannot forget bad things that happened to you in the past. Guilt in the extreme is expressed in the form of defeatism, where you lack any hope and expect to fail in whatever you do. In such circumstances a gloomy attitude develops where you reflect a feeling of unhappiness and loss of hope.

Such a feelings might arise because you think you have failed your family and society. Guilt might also appear because of unfulfilled dreams you had thought were achievable, and paid a great deal for, but failed to succeed because of either the way you did it was not right or the overall circumstances did not allow it to succeed. Guilt can also arise as a result of the contradiction between what you want to be and what you are. Such a status might also come about from losing something you had, be it money, power or family as a result of something beyond your control or some specific mistake you did. In such situations it becomes difficult to admit and live with the consequences of your failure within the society. Coping with your guilt in the right way and being ready to live with its consequences requires great courage and energy.

Guilt is an oppressive and debilitating burden to bear, some way must be found to appease such a feeling. Driven by the urge to appease, societies tend to develop coping mechanisms depending on their culture, many times influenced by religious beliefs and overall development standards.

Christians for example believe that guilt (both the guilt precipitated by particular sins and the guilt which humans carry around with them for merely being human) is to accept the mercy, grace, and forgiveness of Christ, which is vouchsafed by his sacrificial Atonement on the Cross. Others religions and cultures also have their own coping mechanisms. In Islam for example, a person wounded by guilt and related pain is supposed to reconcile himself by fasting and praying more than what is regularly expected to get remorse from the pain. If the person can afford it, he is expected to make a HAJ trip, and organize a SEDEKA where he feeds the poor to cleanse himself from the pain and guilt.

In traditional Ethiopia, guilt of a great burden tends to be stated as a reason to send a person to a monastery, 'YASMENENAL' as it is called in Amharic. This is not to imply that such monasteries are filled with spiritual people meeting with their God, but it is to express that such guilt can only be purified with the power of God by meeting him. Many who could not stand the consequences of their guilt, and failed to bear the pain of their guilt, also travelled far away to spend the rest of their lives in places they do not have any connection to. They think such a move allows them a fresh start.

But, our society also knows courageous people who acknowledge their guilt and live with its consequences. In our lives we know people who are condemned from their religious titles because they violated a religious dogma. Some of them admit such a failure and live as normal citizens stripped of their titles. It was not uncommon to see

former priests, stripped of their titles, named as AFRASH, a derogatory name indicating their failure to abide by the norms of priesthood.

However, many of these traditional mechanisms are not holding as the overall socio-economic environment that created them is changing. The world is changing into a small village; wherever you go on the planet, you will find your country person. Leave alone finding a place to hide within your country; it has even become difficult to hide abroad, as is the case for many Diaspora Ethiopians who live with pain. The use of religious values as a healing instrument is also decreasing. Materialism and utilitarianism is increasingly dominating the values of human beings.

Guilt creates dis-equilibrium; a person cannot live long in such a state. Emotional decisions like suicide are taken as a result of continued dis-equilibrium. That is why human instinct looks for ways of appeasing its guilt so that some sort of equilibrium is created, allowing them to cope with the internal pain that comes out of guilt.

Guilt of different levels continues to exist and mechanisms for coping with it are developing over time. Many people with mild feelings of guilt and pain engage themselves in their day-to-day work and try to cope with it by giving a different meaning to their lives. Those with severe feelings visit a psychiatrist or a counselor to assist them with coping with their pain. This requires them to admit their problems. There are many facilities in the modern world providing such services. The few who fail to have the energy and courage for such actions tend to move into the 'blame game' and delve into the politics of guilt.

The dominant nature of current Ethiopian Diaspora politics (a politics that apparently appears as opposition politics) is very much colored and driven by the politics of guilt. I thought of covering the broader Ethiopian Diaspora situation before specifically discussing the politics of guilt, its manifestation and specifically my suggestions on how it should be approached.

The position of a Diaspora Ethiopian is very difficult no matter the status, level of education or type of success the person has made in life. You are far away from home and you have left a lot of your compatriots at home. You are only remotely connected to whatever good or bad happens at home. In many instances what you hear and know about conditions at home are picked from media clips, relatives' conversations and sometimes hearsay information from your compatriots who visited home. The information you get might be incomplete and sometimes contradicting. Particularly during bad times, it makes you feel guilty for not directly sharing what your

compatriots are going through. You don't even know exactly what change your presence would have made to alleviate the suffering.

Most, if not all, diaspora Ethiopians live a painful life like their compatriots. Even those who have adopted the citizenship of their host countries struggle with issues of identity, cultural differences and homesickness. No matter how successful they become they find themselves being treated like second-class citizens sometimes, if not every day. Being an Ethiopian Diaspora and coming from a country whose name is used in the English dictionary to elaborate the word 'famine', adds more pain. You have a country as beautiful as any other country, you have a country with a long history and with as many hard working people as the average but yet, your country has failed to feed itself to the extent of its name being used to elaborate the word 'famine'.

Sometimes you may find someone working under you but at the same time pitying you because you are Ethiopian, at times even a beggar looking to you for alms will pity you. Everyone was somebody at home but this altogether might make him feel empty, isolated and being nobody in someone else's land. It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that everyone in the Diaspora, particularly the first generation Diaspora, live under a feeling of guilt and pain.

For most of them it is a choice they made in their lives. It is a choice they made to get a better paying job, a better education for their children and/or a choice they made to meet their planned objectives. For these Diaspora, no matter how bitter the pain, they cope with it by providing a new meaning to their situation and relating it to their broader objectives in life. Many support their families at home; some invest and prepare a soft landing for a return sometime in the future. Many even engage in philanthropist activities connected to their country.

Many actively engage in changing the image of their country. They promote the culture and tourism potential of their country. They encourage their colleagues to visit their country; some even facilitate such a visit by providing the 'right' information and connections. From time to time, they actively participate in the politics of their home country either in support or opposition of a phenomenon, and try to stay connected and have their say in the national political scene. When they support something good happening in their country, they promote the image of their country and this reduces their pain. When they see something bad happening in their country they oppose and make their voice heard which, in turn, also reduces their pain. They do not claim to be politicians because they know their limitations and understand that politics is a full time job that someone with another full time job cannot assume.

The few who engage in the politics of guilt try to cope with their pain by spreading a cloud of confusion and illusion. The guilt of most of these people is associated with their political and power associations from some time in their past. Others also agonize over a terrible failure they consider happened in their life. Their driving reason to engage themselves is because they lack the strength and energy to admit their failure in life and aspirations. In doing so, they want someone to take the blame for these feelings.

These people become the first victims of their actions and live in pain, regardless of what they do in this direction. It is after lying to themselves that they lie to others. It is after fooling themselves that they try to fool others. Deep inside they know what they are doing and that becomes a source for increased frustration. The problem with these people is not only that they live in a vicious circle, but the cloud and illusion they spread contaminates the information environment for the Diaspora.

Many are thousands of miles away from home and unfortunately there is little development in information gathering and dissemination. Information through various media outlets hardly goes out as clear data and it is often colored by the editorial policies of the media outlets. Neither the regime's willingness to disseminate information nor its capacity to do so is competent. Until such a time when the right information transparency and dissemination environment is in place, such people fill the information gap in the Diaspora by either spreading hearsay or fabricating it.

The essence of such politics is a politics of pushing and skirting away responsibility by looking for someone to blame for the agony and pain that continues to eat you. If you are in such a blame game, you do not need to have principles you advocate for. Your guiding principle is accusing someone for anything wrong that has happened to you, any direction in this regard works. . It does not require serious thinking because all you need is to find a topic you can talk about. You can pick an issue, even for that matter fabricate information, and promote it; you do not care how much it survives as long as it has allowed you to cope with the day. The next day you can move onto another topic of a similar nature.

Such politics does not have direction and fails to have principles to advocate for. These politics somehow served to help you cope with your guilt and pain by engaging you in some way. The politics of guilt is quite different to opposition politics, although sometimes it becomes hard to draw a line as persons driven by guilt sometimes champion agendas of opposition politics and the politics of opposition sometimes get trapped by agendas promoted by the politics of guilt. The similarity between them is that they are driven by anger and pain. The difference is that the politics of guilt is

driven by carry over anger, pain and what drives you is what made you angry in the past and not realistic future objectives. But opposition politics is driven by current anger, pain and passion. The politics of guilt fails to be rational while rationality is an utmost criterion for opposition politics.

Without rational calculation it is difficult to find yourself consistently winning the hearts and minds of citizens. Opposition politics that aspires to take political power, evaluates what appeals the populace to rally behind it. It considers the populace as a rational entity and plans to win their rational thinking. It tries its best to attack its opponent on its weaknesses and never intends to defy whatever its opponent does, and this makes it loyal to the existing political environment. When weak it intends to fill the gap of politics by locating the weaknesses and when strong it tends to use this strength to take over power from its opponent. Failing to do so insults the intelligence of the people and they lose serious support from them.

At times you might find the populace playing with you while its intelligence is being insulted but only with the purpose of meeting some other objective, and never to be fooled and continue being fooled.

I would have loved to discuss this topic without mentioning any of the personalities but I found it difficult to connect the thesis without supporting it with some discussion on personalities. My intention is not to discuss them but to provide an empirical example to the problem I am discussing. I ask for an excuse if this hurts anyone and I only want them to know that I do not have any intention of doing any harm to them. A range of persons could be discussed in this category and it will be beyond the scope of this little piece to do that. The list of such individuals can be long but I preferred to briefly discuss Aregawi Berhe from the long-standing ones; Berhanu Nega from the middle and Feseha Eshetu from the most recent ones.

Aregawi Berhe has been one of the top leaders of the TPLF from its founding up until its 10 years of struggle. Many leadership changes have occurred during his time. The Central Committee made some of these changes, while others were made by the congress of the party. At one point his colleagues claimed that he failed to be up to the growing tasks of the revolution and decided that he should be thrown out of the Central Committee. They then followed the process he was part of initiating and brought him down from the helm of power. He was then temporarily assigned to a zonal logistics office, an assignment he failed to cope with. He then left the field with the excuse of seeking medical treatment in Sudan, and never returned. A former revolutionary leader ended up as a refugee in Holland.

His situation makes me understand the level of guilt and pain he might have endured in his past. Had he had one thought for change, there was every chance for him to promote it from the helm of power he once held. But we have never heard him claiming to do so and/or any constraint he had to do so. Everything he tells us is about things he says 'happened' after he left. The few times we heard or read his reflections, we read about him skirting the responsibilities he acknowledges were made during his time.

Later, he began calling for us to fight against the government that he does not have a clue about from his self-exile. He left the organization while it was in its guerilla phase. The organization that marched to Addis is a different organization than the one he knows except for the fact that several people continued with the new organization. He does not know the EPRDF; he was struggling with life as a refugee when the EPRDF was founded. He does not know it through its process of creating a government. Leave alone the changes the country went through, he does not even have a clue of the changes his hometown experienced. If at all, he only knows anything from media clips and hearsay information and some analysis, which he usually reads and understands through his pain and guilt.

We have never heard him speak one coherent thought. Yet, for a long time he has been calling for us to fight and overthrow this regime. How could this be serious politics except as politics of guilt? Trying to be someone in an environment that makes you NO-ONE! The saddest thing is that this cannot make him someone. He continues to insult his own intelligence and our intelligence for that matter. It only tells me of a person who suffers from guilt and associated pain, and one who struggles to cope by appearing engaged in politics.

Berhanu Nega is a former EPRP member. He even joined the Army of the EPRP for a brief moment and became a refugee when the EPRP went into disarray. Few of his former colleagues from EPRP were determined to find a way to struggle. They later founded the EPDM that marched into Addis as a member of the EPRDF coalition now called the ANDM. He made his choice at the time, went to the Diaspora and even made good use of his time by educating himself when many of his compatriots were struggling to settle in and accept their situation.

After the EPRDF marched into Addis, he initially returned to run his family business and build a commercial building. Later, he became an instructor in the economics department of the Addis Ababa University and headed the Ethiopian Association of Economists for a brief time. While doing these he was in and out of Ethiopian politics, sometimes as a Human Rights 'activist'. On the eve of the 2005 elections he jointly

created an organization called 'Rainbow Ethiopia: Movement for Democracy and Social Justice'. In preparation to the 2005 election this organization created a loose coalition together with the Ethiopian Democratic League, All Ethiopian Unity Party and United Ethiopian Democratic Party as they call it Medhn party.

In a free and fair election Ethiopia had never seen in its life, the coalition got significant votes in parliament and almost all the votes to form a government for the Addis Ababa City administration - of which Berhanu Nega was running to be the mayor. The EPRDF took the votes as a vote of 'no confidence' and accepted it but also took the assignment of addressing its problems indicated by the public's votes.

However, the loose coalition failed to use this opportunity as a result of its internal division. Berhanu, who was at the gate to hold the chair of the city mayor, not only lost the chair due to the chaos he was part of creating but also ended up in prison. After gaining his release in exchange for agreeing to request for amnesty, he went to the US and became part of forming an organization that uses every means to overthrow the government, including armed struggle.

Deep inside, he knows that you cannot wage and run an armed struggle in Ethiopia from the US. He also knows that neither the US State Department nor the European Union can enable him to head the city administration. He has a full time job to earn his bread and butter yet he claims that he is the leader of the 'organization' with 'complex tasks'. He also knows that leading an organization, waging an armed struggle or even being a politician is a full time job.

I can understand his guilt and pain because the power that was within his reach slipped because of his own failure and the failure of his loose coalition, never to get it back. But, I would expect him to treat his guilt and pain in a proper way. The members he gathered are members whom he call 'Dirties, I am feeling I have dirtied myself by associating myself with you'. I am not interested in investigating who is dirty in the real sense but this incident tells me that he is living in a vicious cycle. His family investments are still running in the country and I hope he is still making money out of it. But it is a paradox to hear him calling diaspora Ethiopians 'not to invest in their country' and calling them to sabotage the economy. We don't definitely know on what is happening to his returns from the companies. I hope he is not involved in smuggling foreign currency, a crime and guilt that only serves to compound his guilt and wounds.

We Ethiopians have a soft heart towards educated people, YETEMARE YIGDELEGNE, as we say it in Amharic. BUT, what is the value of education if it cannot change the

personality of a person and enable him to treat himself in the proper way modern science allows?

Feseha Eshetu, a former medical doctor in the Ethiopian Air Force, started a business with a capital of 700 Birr (as he officially claims) and built an empire worth millions of Birr up until he sold it. It is reported that he sold his business for over sixty million Birr. Feseha was caught in the crisis of 'middle age syndrome' when he was at the height of his success and started making all sorts of blunders in his private life. I do not want to delve into the details of this personal crisis, as it is very much private. But if he insists, I can detail out my findings from my interview with his former wives. He then moved to Dubai and later moved 'far' to the US. This should not have been a problem for anyone as far as he chose it and was happy to live with it. The problem arises when this person intends to insult our intelligence.

He is now telling us the reason for his self-exile is because the business environment in Ethiopia was not conducive. This is after he told us that he was successful in building a multi-million business with a humble beginning of seven hundred Birr. He sold his empire at his own will and similar businesses are continuing to flourish, for that matter the business he sold is expanding and making money under a new owner. After a long absence he now became a 'political activist'. He declared that he 'originated' the idea of creating a 'transitional national council' to abolish the current government because he questioned the future and felt guilty about his silence. Amazingly, he got together with his friends, told us that he has founded it and he is the secretary of the council.

He must be joking! A person who failed to manage his house and private life in an orderly way is not fit for a simple community task leave alone for a national mission even if Ethiopia was under the yoke of a Mengistu-type government. What type of friends could these people be to associate with him? It can only be persons like him-people on the way to go. I would not be surprised if this crisis has exploded because he finished his share from the 62 million Birr sale of his business. We know he did not invest it back in business. Neither could he expatriate it legally. The only way to do so is to smuggle it through the black market. Who knows, the anti-laundering unit of the FDRE might sometime in the future tell us about this crime.

It is difficult to see such persons as people with keen interest and commitment to politics. There are many similar groups that feed each other's thirst for attention and relevance. Each one of them is invited to each other's conferences as guest speakers, audience members and fundraisers. They are the leaders, they are the audience and they are the people. They have so many 'organizational names' no matter the size of the

membership. They make and break coalitions continuously. At times a so-called 'negotiation' or 'alliance' between two parties might be an exercise over a Starbucks coffee between two individuals with no one else behind them. They produce rumors, they eat it and it eats them at the end.

Recent developments in medicine places mental problems in between a normal and a crazy person and have developed technology to cope with it. Because our culture does not know this problem neither them nor anyone around them takes them for being sick. Many of the crazy people we find in every small town might have initially had a mild mental problem. It is the kids who play around with them that send them to absolute craziness. Then they end up being a source of fun for kids on the streets. The type of people we discussed above live on the margins of normality and complete madness. We can drive them to complete madness or we can assist them to normalcy. I hope we choose to engage them seriously by confronting them with our minds and not watching them go to the final stage. They are our private shame now but they can be our public shame later when they end up in complete craziness.