

**TO BE (A NEOLIBERAL) AND NOT TO BE (A LIBERAL): A REJOINDER TO
ADAL ISSAW**

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I will begin with an apology. Adal Issaw took exception to my characterization of him as an “acolyte.” The Oxford Dictionary defined an “acolyte” as “a devoted follower or admirer.” I did not think that Adal Issaw would be offended by being referred to as a devoted follower or admirer of the EPRDF since he claimed to be a revolutionary democrat. As he thought “acolyte” to be a derogatory term, in much the same way the Oxford Dictionary characterized the term “scribbled” he used to describe my writing, I do apologize.

Apparently, Adal Issaw and I agree on many things. Because I did not raise a single point about my characterizing the EPRDF as at the forefront of introducing and carrying out neoliberal economic reform measures, I assume he agrees with me. I also tend to agree with Adal Issaw that the neoliberal project is one that would disproportionately benefit global capitalism (what Adal Issaw referred to as the West) than the poor and marginalized people of the developing world. I am qualifying my agreement for two reasons. First, the benefits of neoliberalism or for that matter of the “developmental state” also tend to benefit disproportionately global capitalism as well as the few and lucky within developing countries too. Merely accusing the West with thievery without also commenting on the corruption, nepotism, growing gap between the haves and have-nots, and increasing pauperization taking place in developing countries does not seem to be intellectually honest.

Second, neoliberal prescriptions are not frozen in time and have changed since what they were during the time of Thatcher and Reagan. After years of internal and external debates, the

World Bank issued its World Development Report in 1997 reversing course and calling for strengthening the state and enhancing its participation in the economy. The major policy prescription that flowed from the call for a strengthened state with enhanced service delivery capacity was public sector reform. I am sure Adal Issaw is aware of the successive attempts by the EPRDF at public sector reform through decentralization, strengthening the capacity of *wereda* administrations, BPR, and capacity building underwritten by the World Bank and other western donor agencies.

The EPRDF and the agencies of international aid and capitalism could see eye to eye on these reform programs because the programs are technical and managerial tools of economic liberalization and not necessarily part of the democratic organization of state power. The term used by the World Bank to describe these measures is “good governance” – in Amharic “*melkam astedader*.” Neither the World Bank nor major international aid agencies insist on a fully democratic political order with the powers of the state in its relations with citizens bounded by fundamental freedoms, although they suggest periodic elections to allow the expression of preferences. As the World Bank put it in its 1997 Report elections are good, but not as important as the bureaucratic capacity of state agencies first at governing and second at service delivery.

Whether the strategies adopted since 1997 and especially since 2000 by international development (and you can read here neoliberal) agencies and followed by the EPRDF in its poverty alleviation strategy papers would prove to be successful is something time would tell. So far, they seem to be working as many countries in Africa, including Ethiopia, managed to attain a higher rate of economic growth than used to be the case.

You can be illiberal in your politics (that means your political regime can be repressive) and neoliberal in your economics. The first country that experimented with the policy

prescriptions of neoliberalism was Chile under General Augusto Pinochet. In countries such as China under the Chinese Communist Party, Singapore under the People's Action Party and South Korea under the Democratic Republican Party, the state played a significant role in directing the economy with the degree of its involvement varying from country to country. The economic model followed in these countries seemed to work. What explained their success, however, is something that needs closer examination. Of course, politically all three of them were openly anti-liberal, with little if any tolerance to political dissent, claiming some sort of Asian exceptionalism. Their repressive regimes, however, ruled societies in which one ethnic group dominated numerically or otherwise, and with a cultural background of collectivist religions. Unlike the EPRDF, the regimes also promoted an ideology of a unified nation.

Whether the sociological and historical experiences of Ethiopia are such that they would warrant replicating the political organization of society followed in China, South Korea, and Singapore is something that we can debate. For the moment, there are two points that I want to point out. First, there is no direct relation between political liberalism on the one hand and the role of the state in the economy, although, as I wrote in my previous piece, political liberalism calls on the state to respect the rights of individuals to their property. Second, the model of economic liberalization with a strong leadership from and participation by the state under a politically repressive regime is not unique to Asia. Neither does it always work. Many African states followed the model in the period after independence. It failed terribly and provided the intellectual justification for the structural adjustment programs of the early 1980s. Closer to home, it was the model that the regime of Emperor Haile Sellassie followed with the adoption of the first ever comprehensive development plan in Africa in 1957 and implementing three successive five-year plans until its fall in 1974. It was also the model that the *Derg* followed

taking the role of the state in the economy and the repressiveness of the political regime to unprecedented levels. We all know what happened.

But that was an aside, because there is something that Adal Issaw and I agree on. Both of us agree that Ethiopian society has to be democratic. In fact, Adal Issaw argued the EPRDF has perfected democracy in Ethiopia and cited evidence from the recently held elections in Ethiopia to show his and the EPRDF's support to political pluralism. I am glad that both Adal Issaw and the EPRDF see legitimizing political opposition in Ethiopia as necessary. What I am doubtful about is whether there is real commitment on EPRDF's and its supporters' part to ensure the continued and meaningful expression of political opposition in Ethiopia without subscribing to a view of the state whose powers are limited by the fundamental rights of citizens, that is without subscribing to the political ideology of liberalism. The simple answer to that question, of course, is no. A cursory look at the Constitution of the FDRE and its provisions on human rights is sufficient to get that answer. However, constitutional provisions are meaningless unless they are accompanied by a belief system that supports them. My doubt stems from observing the prevalence and the increasing translation into practice of a political belief that Adal Issaw expressed almost unthinkingly in his article and that I am afraid is behind his and the EPRDF's attack on liberalism.

Adal Issaw indicated that belief when he wrote the idea of one Yosyas Kifelyesus defending liberalism in a debate with Ato Bereket Simon funny. Reading between the lines, as Adal recommended, I can see two dangerous assumptions behind Adal's thought. The first is that nobody can be better than Ato Bereket. This might be a case of sycophancy, or it might be a case of personality cult. As several editorials in the Amharic version of *The Reporter* pointed out, and contrary to its days of armed struggle, of late the EPRDF seems to attract people with

those diseases. I hope Adal Issaw is not one of them. The second, even more worrisome, assumption is that anyone who dares think outside the officially sanctioned line of the EPRDF is funny (not only in the sense of causing mirth and joviality, but also in the sense of being strange and of unsound mind). Incidentally, that was how the Soviet Communist Party viewed people who dared to think outside the officially sanctioned party line and whom it committed to the numerous mental institutions of the Gulag. I hope Adal Issaw has the clarity of mind to see the logical conclusions of his thought for, as their histories across the world as well as the recent history of the EPRDF itself show us, political parties are mercurial and he may find himself on the wrong side of his party.

The fundamental belief of democracy and of political liberalism is the equality of individuals. Adal Issaw argued that individualism is a product of the West. I am not quite sure how he defined individualism, but the quality of thinking for oneself and holding different opinions about issues are qualities that distinguish humans from animal herds. I do not think that Adal Issaw would argue that these are human qualities limited to the west. That does not mean that we as Ethiopians are a society of herds. Our history of religious dissent among highland Christians as well as the argumentative and deliberative decision making processes of the Afar, the Somali, the Oromo, the Sidama, and other groups, are just a few of the examples of the celebration of individualism among Ethiopians.

The question is the degree of freedom you allow citizens to be able to express their differences. Politically repressive regimes do not think that citizens should have opinions different from the ones held by the leaders of the regime. They do what they can to ensure that no such opinions are legitimately expressed, or those that do not agree with the rulers get a chance at holding state power.

I live in the United States where people of all colors and stripes, from academic dons to ordinary Joes disagree with and do not mince their words in criticizing Barack Obama, one of the most intelligent politicians the world has seen. Nobody would consider these disagreements or criticisms funny, because nobody here believes that Barack Obama has any divinity around him or that the Democratic Party is always right. Ethiopian history over the past century is a history of resistance against the claim that someone or some group is by birth or by definition better than the rest of us.

The intellectual roots of liberalism may have grown in the West. But so did the collectivist ideologies that denounce liberalism, from fascism to communism. More importantly, however, as Ethiopians we have paid dearly for the ideals and values represented by liberalism. Thousands of Ethiopians, from urban intellectuals to rural peasants died in the cause of asserting the fundamental equality of their humanity. They fought and died for the right to be able to think they may have better ideas than their leaders, and to participate in the political debate in their country. As a supporter of the EPRDF, I am sure Adal Issaw is familiar with that history. What he may not know is that these are also the fundamental beliefs of liberalism that distinguish it from other political thoughts.

P.S. Despite his *ad hominem* attack, I do not expect any apologies from Adal Issaw because that just is not in the nature of a political discourse that regards some animals as more equal than others.