

A Radical change of course for Ethiopia, or chaos and Implosion:

A commentary on Lt. General Tsadkan Gebre Tensay's article in Amharic

Publius aethiopicus

Ethiopia under the Tigray People's Liberation Front/Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front-TPLF/EPRDF regime has come to a cross roads, in fact a dead end. Either a change of course towards a genuine constitutional democracy or a nightmarish scenario of the implosion of Ethiopia are the alternatives, as Lt. General Tsadkan Gebre Tensay asserts. The lengthy article published on Horn Affairs by Lt. General Tsadkan G. Tensay, former member of the top leadership of the TPLF and former Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian Armed Forces for almost a decade, is a very interesting development. In recent years the TPLF/EPRDF regime is embroiled in one crisis or another, unable to handle the multiple fault lines and facing total loss of support by the populace in all four corners of Ethiopia. One should recall that the regime declared itself as the sole winner of all 547 parliamentary seats in the May 2015 election.

In dissecting the all-around crisis the regime is mired in, the General does not mince words and shy away from being very frank about the pervasive crises of state, crisis of confidence, crisis of legitimacy. General Tsadkan addresses the all-around crisis - political, economic, massive and pervasive corruption including by The Metals and Engineering Corporation (**METEC**) a quasi-military-industrial complex run by TPLF generals. He also admits and comments on the pervasive hatred and resentment harbored by the majority towards Tigrayans. This salient feature is among the most worrying trends and in fact warning signs in today's Ethiopia under the minority TPLF regime, and its potential to turn into a tragic course.

General Tsadkan also throws powerful salvos and trenchant criticisms of the existing dictatorial political and suffocating economic oligarchy instituted by the TPLF/EPRDF. He states, point blank, the dead end reached by the minority regime. He indicates, unless there is a fundamental change, a potentially tragic, indeed, epochal nightmarish, scenario of Ethiopia imploding as a multi-ethnic nation. A multi ethnic nation with historic continuity since antiquity, albeit, checkered by expansions and contractions for millennia.

What makes General Tsadkan's assessment of current conditions in Ethiopia pertinent, and somewhat unique? Such a perspective about the nation's tragic condition under the current dictatorial regime is coming, perhaps for the first time, in a radical and bold fashion, from one of the top leaders of the TPLF and a one-time Chief of Staff of the armed forces from 1991- 2001 before being ousted by Meles Zenawi after TPLF's split. His recommendations for a way forward and solutions therefore has gone beyond what critics of the regime, the likes of General Abebe Tekle Haimnot, a former Airforce Commander, ousted by Meles during the TPLF's split as well, and many others have talked about and written in recent months in regard to the multi-faceted crisis boiling in Ethiopia and overwhelming the readily weak regime of the TPLF/EPRDF rocked with internal contradictions and fissures both within the dominant TPLF and the satellite ANDM and OPDO parties that constitute the so-called EPRDF.

As well known, many scholars and analysts alike have commented about the instability of the current track pursued assiduously by the minority regime of the TPLF/EPRDF. The fault lines are expanding, the contradictions are visible and there is a widening gulf separating the regime and the people. A wide chasm exists between the corrupt and inept army's Tigrean top brass and the majority non-Tigrean rank and file line officers. There is massive discontent and widespread perception by the overwhelming majority of non-Tigreans that Tigreans have become enablers and apologists for a Kleptocratic, ethnocratic and brutal minority regime. These views have been given credence during the Oromo protest that rocked the Oromo region and beyond, proving the fallacy of the regime's 25 year narrative that Ethiopia, as a democratic and federal state, for the first time in its history, has brought about the equality of the nations and nationalities that constitute it.

Under this false narrative, Ethiopia, under the current minority TPLF/EPRDF regime, has granted and upheld the equality of all nations and nationalities, including devolution and decentralization of power to the regions to govern their respective regions. This narrative, however, has been busted as a result of the many identity conflicts and popular demands for genuine self-governance in zonal and regional affairs that have been popping up throughout Ethiopia, in particular, the massive and widespread Oromo protest that was triggered by the Addis Ababa Master Plan. The Oromo protest is still continuing despite the ruthless massacre of over 500 Oromos by the regime's special forces and the arrest of tens of thousands in Oromia region in the past nine months, a development that has gotten a wide coverage by the media and attention by International Human Rights organizations, US Senators and the European Parliament.

Just like in Oromia, years of pent up grievances, injustice, inequality, and lack of basic rights to protect and assert ethnic identities, despite the regime's narrative to the contrary, have been simmering in many parts of Ethiopia. Just a few weeks ago it came to the open, in Northern Gondar, Amhara region, where the historically Amhara region of *Wolkayit*, *Tegede* and *Telemt* along the border of formerly, Gondar and Tigray provinces was forcibly annexed and made part of Tigray by the TPLF. Along with the unilateral decision to annex the sub region to Tigray, the Amhara inhabitants were forced to change their identity for the past 25 years. Now the Amharas of *Wolkayit*, *Tegede* and *Telemt*, after trying all legal and peaceful avenues to lodge their demands, have resorted to armed rebellion and civil disobedience to resist an unjust act that has been imposed on their very existence as a people of Amhara ethnic origin, separate from Tigray and Tigrayan ethnic stock. These are just few of the major fault lines besetting the TPL/EPRDF minority regime that has used brutal force to suppress all forms of demands coming from many sectors of the populace throughout Ethiopia during the past 25 years of its tenure on state power.

In his thoughtful and analytic assessment recognizing the crisis and the all-around faultiness that are prevalent in Ethiopia, General Tsadkan concludes that the status quo is not sustainable - that Ethiopia must democratize. The current one party dictatorship of the TPLF/EPRDF needs to give way to a genuine multiparty democracy with a level playing field for all political forces, there has to be an orderly and peaceful transition, and that a genuinely free, fair and transparent election monitored by the international community has to be held during the next election cycle. Absent such fundamental change, Ethiopia as a multiethnic polity, may be heading towards an implosion and chaos.

On the other hand, it is time to ponder about what is going in the minds of the TPLF leaders, in the minds of their few henchmen in the rest of the so called EPRDF top leadership such as Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) as well as the majority of Tigrean elites allied with the ruling TPLF/EPRDF. Do they have the mindset to heed such a clarion call for a radical change made by the likes of General Tsadkan? Do they really think far beyond the expedient lure of glitters of temporal power and other vested interests that unchecked power brings to its holders? Are they going to think beyond themselves, in fact for the good of themselves too, for the sake of all Ethiopians, including Tigrean people they claim to represent and that of posterity to live and prosper with a leveled playing field in a just, democratic, and free Ethiopia?

Given past track records and their patterns of behavior by these elements of Ethiopia's political elite, that timeless adage of Lord Acton, "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" comes to mind. Not only does absolute power corrupts the body politic of the state and its machineries, but also the mind and spirit of those at the helm and their cronies. They become stupid due to affliction of mental ossification and dissonance from actual reality which absolute power has a tendency to nurture, however, nurture in retrograde. Hence a very doubtful scenario, whether those at the helm of the TPLF/EPRDF dictatorial regime, have both the political will and the wisdom to change course, and change radically before it is too late. The crossroads options remains to be seen.

Foreign and security policy circles of Western governments, especially the US and UK, allied to the minority TPLF/EPRDF regime, have been in denial about the prevailing and unsustainable conditions in Ethiopia. Due to their primary reason for supporting the regime, as an ally in the war against terrorism and extremism in the Horn of Africa, these governments continue to act like the proverbial ostrich that buried its head in the sand. However, sober and objective assessment of Ethiopia by foreign analysts and leaders of credible international rights organizations have come to recognize the all-around crisis situation in Ethiopia and the widening fault lines in the society as result of the regime's dictatorial actions and measures and are recommending fundamental change in Ethiopia.

On July 12, 2016 House Foreign Relations Committee hearing convened by Chairman Ed Royce, Ambassador Mark Lagon, President of Freedoms House, in his testimony, stated that *"... In November 2015, the EPRDF decided to expand the boundaries of the capital at the expense of farmers and communities living in the surrounding areas of the Oromia region. This decision was made without adequate consultation with affected communities and sparked widespread protests resulting in the arrests of tens of thousands, including students, teachers, musicians, opposition politicians, health workers, and people who provided assistance or shelter to fleeing students. At least 400 have been killed by Ethiopian security forces; an unknown number remain in detention; and torture continues to be reported. Protests like these break out because citizens have no other ways to engage in the political system or express discontent, which increases instability...."*

During the same testimony, Ambassador Lagon added *"... there cannot be peace and stability if the government restricts political space and suppresses legitimate dissent with force. And without peace, there can be no reliable access to food or health care or education. A country cannot free itself from*

dependence on foreign aid without strong and accountable governance. U.S. tax dollars will be wasted as long as Ethiopia lacks rule of law, pluralism, and respect in practice of the pluralism, and respect in practice of the rights of all. The United States would be far wiser to fund a more comprehensive approach to development. We should work to strengthen human rights in Ethiopia to enable a truly peaceful, prosperous, and more reliable security partner...."

In May of 2016, Mr. Adotei Akewi, Managing Director of Government Relations of Amnesty International (AI) USA also wrote an article titled *Wrong Way: The Ever Closing Political Space in Ethiopia*. In that article, he advised those concerned, allies of the TPLF/ERPFD regime that *"...supporting an oppressive regime for the sake of regional security will only further destabilize a region already ravaged by conflict, unclear borders, poverty and lack of respect for the rule of law, all in the pursuit of short term stability. The Ethiopian people deserve better than that..."*

Does the international community in general, and the donor countries in particular understand the depth of the crisis facing Ethiopia under the minority regime? Do they know and understand the high stakes and ramifications of the current trajectory of the deepening ethnic and other faultiness in Ethiopia for the Horn of Africa and global security? Ethiopia may implode, as General Tsadkan argues and predicts, unless there is a radical change towards a fundamental reconfiguration of the state towards a genuine constitutional democracy governed by rule of law, and respect for fundamental liberties that are absent under the current TPLF/EPRDF regime. The current regime they wholeheartedly support with diplomatic, political, and military assistance is leading Ethiopia towards a downwards trajectory of instability, possibly civil war, or even worse case scenarios as Dawit Giorgis, Executive Director of African Strategic and Security Studies, wrote under the heading "Rwanda Genocide: Lessons for Ethiopians."

The narrative that Ethiopia, as a stable and reliable partner, under a minority dictatorship is losing its cache. It is time for the International community and all national stakeholders to come to a sober acceptance of the brutal truth and face the glaring reality in Ethiopia. It is neither acceptable nor sustainable to do nothing when all the writings are on the wall. Ethiopia is in grave danger. Too little, too late statements, after potential tragic scenarios unfold become nightmarish reality, is a recipe of cynics, bordering criminals. It is time for a radical change in order to avert the current slide towards instability and chaos that the current regime appear to be leading Ethiopia.

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Highlights from an article written in Amharic by Lt. General Tsadkan G. Tensay, former Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian Armed Forces

Lt. General Tsadkan G. Tensay, former Chief of Staff has written a bold article calling for the regime to undertake fundamental political changes to spare the country from implosion and turmoil. Here are some of the highlights from the rather lengthy, albeit, bold proposition from a man who once was a member of the ruling clique till his dismissal by the late dictator and mastermind, Meles Zenawi.

- Human and democratic rights that were enshrined in the constitution are not fully respected. Even worse, the political space has become too narrow to be accommodative to the opposition. The quagmire that the government finds itself now was the result of the absolute monopolization of political and economic power by the ruling party and its leaders.
- Once assuming political power and the political upper hand, the EPRDF has gradually become antidemocratic. Many cases could be cited here, but will only mention the three salient cases and the undemocratic means that the EPRDF used to resolve them:
 - 1) The way the EPRDF handled the issue with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)
 - 2) The way the TPLF handled the crises within the Front itself [refers to the 2001 split within the Front]
 - 3) The 2005 elections and the way the Front dealt with the situation in its aftermath.
- The oppressive and undemocratic rule by the regime has become unbearable to the masses. On top of that, the standard of living has become too expensive and unemployment too high. The people do not see any hope that the regime would resolve their problems soon. All these factors have forced the people to protest and revolt against the government soon after it declared 100% victory in the 2015 elections. The government was also forced to admit that there are real problems that it cannot shy away from.
- Based on the current situations in the country, there are three scenarios that could unfold:

Scenario 1) due to the ongoing popular uprising and political demand and the added pressure from foreign forces, the country could plunge into total chaos that the government could not control. The odds that this scenario could happen seem little, but not zero. It could happen and the government should be ready. The protest in Oromo region has put strain on the government, especially on the regional government. The uprising was halted by the intervention of the federal forces. If the protest kept its momentum and was joined by other popular protests, it is easy to predict what it could do to the central government.

Scenario 2) to continue with the status quo of crises. The regime would try to buy time and stay in power by making few changes here and there, and sacking some officials to appease the populace. This scenario would be the best preferred by the regime in power. This scenario could extend the crises but would not resolve it. It would prevent a peaceful resolution of the crises and hence would create a fertile

ground for those who try to resolve the crises through the use of force. This scenario could cost the country a great deal.

Scenario 3) to begin a peaceful and orderly transition. This requires the acknowledgement that there is a crises in the country; and begin the process of transition with the participation of all political forces and the general public. This scenario also prevents the previous destructive scenarios from happening. It is therefore incumbent on those of us who worry about the future of the country to work for the realization of this scenario.

- What should be the role of the people of Tigray in resolving the current crises in the country? Should the role of the people of Tigray be to protect and defend the regime that is ruling with the help of its security forces and the military, and alienated and hated by the people? What is the political stand taken by the people of Tigray in the current political crisis in the country?
- The people of Tigray, together with the rest of the Ethiopian people need to work for the full implementation of the Constitution. The fact that few Tigrean elites hold political power is not a guarantee for the people of Tigray.
- I don't understand why the country's industrialization is being led by army generals. METEC has been tasked with the production of electric power, sugar production and building rails. It is ideal that those projects be done by local manufacturing. But why are they under the complete control of army generals? If the army had the technical capacity and know how, it should rather focus on maintaining and even building tanks, war planes, vehicles and communication equipment.
- The relationship among the legislative, the judiciary and the executive must be clearly defined. There should be check and balance. The reality we have now in the country is that the executive controls the politics and also the economy of the country, which resulted in the current political quagmire.
- The executive is engaged in promulgating restrictive laws to inhibit any movement by the opposition.
- A party that cannot resolve its internal contradictions in a democratic manner cannot be a vanguard of democracy.
- The EPRDF had come up with several laws that restrict the human and political rights promulgated in the constitution. It uses the security and military to hang on to power. The EPRDF should remove all obstacles that limit the activities of opposition political parties.
- The role of the military should be that of defending the sovereignty of the country and the constitution; it should not be a major player in the politics and economy of the country, as we see in Ethiopia today.

- The EPRDF is not willing to fight mal administration, corruption and abuse of power as it fears genuine action against these problems would lead to its disintegration and down fall.
- Those in political power also control the economy. The executive is also the one that steers the wheel of economy. The executive is the owner of major projects and also the main employer.
- Since the executive controls the economy, cronies and benefactors are engaged, under the guise of party membership, in rent seeking corrupt practices.
- The people should have the power to put the executive in check; not the other way around.
- In order to come out of the current crises, human and political rights enshrined in the constitution should be fully implemented; and we need to pave the way for all political forces to participate in a peaceful political engagement and fair competition without any interference.
- All political parties should come together and establish a pillar institution that would facilitate a smooth political transition which would culminate in the next election that the country is slated to hold.
- Details for a peaceful political transition could be decided by consultations and negotiations among the various political parties, including the ruling party, with the aim of fully realizing the rights protected in the constitution.

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