

# Ethiopia: The Myth of a Stable and Reliable Partner Under the Minority TPLF Regime

By Neamin Zeleke

*"I want the superiority of one ethnic group to end" – Ethiopia's Olympic Silver medalist Feyisa Lilesa on Al Jazeera*

*"Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." - John F. Kennedy*

In the first installment of this series, the myth of a strong military under the TPLF/EPRDF regime was examined. This sequel article discusses the manifold policies and measures taken by the ruling TPLF/EPRDF's and their consequences for peace and stability in Ethiopia and the sub region.

A myth promoting the minority TPLF regime as a reliable and stable partner in the Horn of Africa has been circulating for years among Western policy makers, think tank analysts and academics, especially in the US, UK, and other western countries. This should not come as a surprise: since 9/11, the primary preoccupation of western foreign and security policymakers has been fighting global terrorism.

With the security and counter terrorism imperative becoming the primary driver of foreign policy, values the West in general, America in particular, claim to champion such as human rights, democracy, and freedom of the press have long been relegated to the back burner. Ethiopia's TPLF/EPRDF regime, despite representing only 6% of Ethiopia's 100 million population, has benefited for many years from this development and reaped an important windfall in the form of direct and indirect support from these countries that has enabled it to extend its lease on state power and perpetuate its neo-totalitarian minority domination and hegemonic rule until today. Aid from the US and the West has continued despite the fact that the minority regime has been committing a range of crimes against the people of Ethiopia with impunity.

Reputable international rights groups, European parliamentarians and American lawmakers have occasionally criticized the TPLF/EPRDF regime's severe human rights violations. The U.S. State Department's annual reports have documented and published the widespread abuse of Ethiopia's people by the minority regime. It has become obvious even among the TPLF/EPRDF's apologists within these countries' foreign policy establishments that the government has become highly repressive, authoritarian, and brutal and that it has engaged in war crimes and crimes against humanity. Cases include the Ogaden, where hundreds of villages were burned, thousands executed extra-judicially and hundreds of women were raped by the regime's security forces. In

Gambella, in just a single day in 2003, over 400 Anuaks were massacred. To date, not a single perpetrator has been held accountable.

Since the onset of protests ten months ago by the Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, followed by more protests by the second largest ethnic group, the Amhara, in Gondar and Gojam, the minority regime has intensified its brutal repression in these regions to the point that it could be characterized as ethnic cleansing. Hundreds of unarmed protesters have been killed and tens of thousands thrown into concentration camps in remote parts of the country under horrific conditions of torture, hard labor, and disappearance. Many are feared to have been extrajudicially executed or taken to the regime's Tigrayan homeland to be held incommunicado in dungeons that the TPLF has used since its guerilla days.

International media outlets have noted about the horror in Ethiopia as follows: NY Times wrote *".....The government's response, according to human rights groups, was ruthless. Witnesses said that police officers shot and killed scores of unarmed demonstrators. Videos circulating from protests thought to be from late last year or earlier this year show security officers whipping young people with sticks as they are forced to perform handstands against a wall. The top United Nations human rights official is now calling for a thorough investigation....."*<sup>1</sup>

*The BBC has reported ".....Oromia and Amhara are the homelands of the country's two biggest ethnic groups. New York-based Human Rights Watch says that more than 400 people have been killed in clashes with the security forces in Oromia, although the government disputes this figure....."*<sup>2</sup>

*Deutsche Welle had the following to say; "...The Ethiopian government receives some 3.5 billion dollars (3 billion euros) annually from international donors and has remained a key strategic partner of the West, particularly the US and the EU, in the 'war against terror.' However, analysts argue this financial support has been toughening the regime's resolve to silence dissenting voices. The western approach of tiptoeing around human right violations in the country and its continued support for the regime has been stirring up anger among sections of the public....."*<sup>3</sup>

Despite the outcry by some foreign observers, most policymakers and government officials of the US, UK, and other donor nations have, for the most part, looked the other way. At best, they have expressed "deep concern," as they have often declared during the past 25 years of the TPLF/EPRDF's cruel tenure at the helm of the Ethiopian state. Tragically, these policy makers,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/world/africa/ethiopia-protests.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FEthiopia&action=click&contentCollection=world&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=8&pgtype=collection&r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/world/africa/ethiopia-protests.html?ref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FEthiopia&action=click&contentCollection=world&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=8&pgtype=collection&r=0)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36940906>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dw.com/en/ethiopian-anti-government-protests-set-to-contin>

pundits, and analysts are blind to the cracks that are widening day by day in Ethiopia's society, state, and security apparatus, including the defense forces, as a consequence.

These obvious trends taking place under the minority TPLF regime resulted, in part, because of the blank check that Western powers, especially the United States, wrote to the minority regime that they regarded as a partner for stability and security in the Horn of Africa. Contrary to the erroneous assumption on which that policy is based, Ethiopia under the minority TPLF regime is a destabilizing force in the region. In fact, the TPLF ruling clique is creating so much insecurity in every sphere of Ethiopian national life that it has alienated the vast majority of the population.

Misrule, poor governance, rampant abuse of power, massive corruption and rent seeking pervade the highest echelons of the civilian and military leadership of the TPLF/EPRDF. Domination and hegemony of political and economic life by a minority ethnic group to an extent never before known in Ethiopia's history and unbridled private appropriation of public state resources to aggrandize ethnic and political cronies have become the norm. These rampant violations of the Ethiopian people's rights are the key features of the Ethiopian state under the TPLF/EPRDF.

The minority regime has closed all meaningful avenues of peaceful dissent, especially since the election of 2005, when the governing TPLF/EPRDF fraudulently declared itself the winner. Other characteristics of the TPLF/EPRDF regime that have widened the nation's fault lines include:

- a. Bogus democracy, the closing of political space, organized and systematic repression to paralyze and weaken the legal opposition, rigged elections and courts used as tools to persecute civil society groups, political dissidents and journalists. The absence of free media and the denial of basic human rights.
- b. Suppression of religious freedom, especially the regime's obdurate attempts to control the internal affairs of the Orthodox Church and the Muslim faithful. The ruthless crackdown on Ethiopian Muslims, who have been demanding religious freedom in the most disciplined and exemplar peaceful disobedience protest movement in recent times.
- c. Sham federalism, where regional autonomy exists only on paper and the country is in reality dominated by the center. The imposition of TPLF puppets on regional governments.
- d. Massive corruption and corrupt exploitation of state and public resources by a single ethnic clique and its political cronies.
- e. Crimes against humanity, including mass murder and torture, committed with impunity.
- f. An unpopular constitution, forced on Ethiopia's people at gunpoint and designed to serve and perpetuate the Tigray minority ruling elite
- g. Unfair and unequal distribution of resources, and the politicization of aid distribution.
- h. Systematic denial of promotion and advancement opportunities to non-Tigrayans in the military and civil service.
- i. Monopolization of economic opportunities by a small ethnic-based elite.

- j. Discredited “revolutionary democracy” economic policies secretly meant to control people rather than deliver sustainable and equitable development.

The resulting fault lines created by these practices divide Ethiopia across several planes:

1. Growing ethnic conflicts resulting from an apartheid-like system imposed against the people’s will.
2. Crackdowns on low intensity insurgencies and liberation movements in nearly every part of the country that further alienate the people from the regime.
3. Resentment by the military’s lower ranks against the senior officers.
4. An increase in secessionist sentiment in multiple ethnic regions.
5. A growing and spreading acceptance of armed struggle as a solution to the country’s problems.
6. Islamic radicalism.
7. Loss of moral authority by the Church.
8. Tensions with neighboring countries.
9. Economic desperation, abject poverty, and unemployment feeding inequality.
10. Disenfranchisement of the non-Tigrayan business class.
11. Severe cracks and simmering contradictions within the ruling TPLF/EPRDF on the one hand, and the increasing conflicts and contradictions of the leadership with that of the mid-level and lower levels members of the Amhara and Oromo junior partners of the dominant TPLF in the so-called EPRDF.

These fault lines, which have been spreading for some time, are too big and too many to ignore. It was naïve to expect that the status quo would continue without a reaction that is opposite and more than equal.

The TPLF/Tigrayan grip on Ethiopia’s military, economy, society and critical institutions of the state and the denial of non-Tigrayans any say in their own country’s affairs have been facts of life for twenty-five years. When one encounters Ethiopian visitors and new immigrants to the US and Europe, the population’s preoccupation with this state of affairs is evident in the disturbing overabundance of stories reflecting this chilling reality and the extreme alienation and marginalization of non-Tigrayans in their nation’s affairs.

According to several studies, over 85% of the military command structure is comprised of TPLF members, while a similar percentage of the lower ranks are non-Tigrayans. The lion’s share of the economy, according to some studies as much as two-thirds, is owned and run by Tigrayan-controlled corporations and parastatals, such as the Endowment for the Relief and Rehabilitation of Tigray (“EFFORT”), a giant conglomerate owned and operated by the TPLF leadership and its senior cadres. Most of the major foreign-financed contracts and projects in the country are given without competitive bidding to various concerns operating under the EFFORT umbrella. METEC, a military-industrial complex that runs several armaments and metal factories, including those taken over from the former DERG/WEP regime, is controlled and managed almost entirely by

former TPLF fighters and has become a cash cow for retiring TPLF military officers. Again, like EFFORT, the METEC Corporation has played a dominant role in the economy by getting a significant portion of all no-bid government contracts next to EFFORT owned companies.

It is public knowledge that the senior leaders, generals, cadres of the TPLF and their proxies own high rise buildings , shopping malls and other ill-gotten assets in addition to many of them holding real estate and liquid assets in foreign countries. These assets were not earned or accumulated through hard work but from the unprecedented corruption and the plunder of state resources at the expense of the Ethiopian people. According to a study by the Oakland Institute, a California based think tank, over 70% of the owners of property acquired in a recent land grab bonanza in Ethiopia's Gambella region are TPLF military officers and civilian elites. The same sordid practice is going on in the Afar region, where even salt production, traditionally the domain of the indigenous afars, has been taken over by Tigrayans linked to the TPLF regime. Similar stories of massive acquisition of public resources unjustly acquired throughout Ethiopia by TPLF and Tigrayans affiliated with the regime are widely circulated.

In order to further understand the all-pervasive domination of the economy and the state apparatus, in every sense of the word, including the unbridled plunder of public resources by Tigrayans elite affiliated with the TPLF and the mafia like inner working of the TPLF and EPRDF, there are two must read books, *YeMeles Trufat*, and *Ye Meles Liqaqit* . Authored in Amharic language by *Ermias Legesse*, former Deputy Minister of Communications, who now works for ESAT , these books are worth reading to find plethora of data and evidence of a very disturbing phenomena in today's Ethiopia, i.e. an extremely greedy and short sighted TPLF leadership, cadres, and Tigrayan elite affiliated with the TPLF engaged in massive plunder, deception, corruption, and perpetual and obdurate machinations to dominate everyone and everything in Ethiopia as if there is no tomorrow.

Almost all prison officials and those who commit horrific torture of the Oromo, Amhara and other political prisoners, accompanied by degrading ethnic insults no less, are, for the most part, Tigrayans. The security services, critical institutions and machineries of the state, foreign affairs, are run by Tigrayans. This is a tragic and dangerous situation.

In a recent Amharic-language article, longtime analyst and commentator on Ethiopian politics *Fekade Shewakena*, a former lecturer at Addis Ababa University, making reference to a series of recent public statement by TPLF bigwigs, *Siyoum Mesfin*, among others, a leading figure of the TPLF and former Foreign Minister, known for telling big lies about the ruling of The Permanent Court of Arbitration regarding the Ethio-Eritrea border dispute-- has called on the Tigrayn ruling elite to have the courage to face up to this grim reality of their own making and end the deception. *Fekade* has called on the TPLF leaders to stop their dangerous instigation of ethnic

violence to create an excuse for continuing their repression against the widespread dissent in the country.<sup>4</sup>

Professor *Al Mariam*, attorney and well-known blogger has made a similar call in his most recent article.<sup>5</sup>

Most recently Olympic silver medalist, *Feyisa Lilesa*, who brought global attention to Ethiopia's political crisis with his defiant gesture at Rio Olympics, stated, "I want the superiority of one ethnic group to end". *Feyisa* was talking about the daily life in Ethiopia that the TPLF's leaders and apologists consistently deny. Their complete denial of the naked reality sometimes appears that the ruling clique is afflicted with cognitive dissonance, a complete separation from reality which they desperately utilize all forms of propaganda instruments to camouflage.

Several respected scholars and political analysts have also asked the question: Where will this sense of marginalization, alienation, resentment, and anger on the part of non-Tigrayan Ethiopians lead the country? Another prominent Ethiopian who has worked in the international system, including as UN Emergency relief coordinator in various failed African states, *Dawit Giorgis* recently wrote, "As was the case in Rwanda decades ago, the accumulated anger directed at this minority group is likely to explode and result in a human catastrophe with serious implications on regional stability," underlining the depth of crisis in present day Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup>

Without a doubt, a seismic eruption is in the making in Ethiopia. Deep anger, resentment, and even hatred are festering as a result of the people's despair and humiliation at the conditions described above. Such conditions are deepening in manifold ways and their manifestations include the growing numbers of Ethiopians joining armed resistance groups. The coming reaction by so many sectors of Ethiopian society who have been alienated and disenfranchised by the regime is clear to see.

In the first installment in this series of articles titled, "The Myth of a Strong Army/Security under the TPLF/EPRDF Regime,"<sup>7</sup> this writer predicted that, under the apartheid-like conditions the TPLF has instituted, where the Tigrayans are the movers and shakers of all levers of power in the armed forces, the majority of the armed forces who are non-Tigrayns would either join the armed resistance or simply melt away. Such incidents have been observed since the onset of the Amhara protest in Gondar in the past few months. Hundreds of army, federal police, and Special Forces have joined the people's struggle around Gondar, or have simply abandoned their posts, as

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<sup>4</sup><http://ecadforum.com/Amharic/archives/16973/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.zehabesha.com/disinformation-in-t-tplf-land-of-living-lies-pinocchio-preaches-truth-against-perception-in-ethiopia/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://ecadforum.com/2016/08/18/the-horn-another-civil-war-looming/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://ecadforum.com/2016/06/29/the-myth-of-a-stable-ethiopia-under-a-minority-regime/>

reported by credible media sources, including Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT). Despite frequent speeches and televised appearances by cynical senior TPLF cadres aimed at scaring the people of Ethiopia into compliance, this trend will continue and surely become widespread as the population continues to intensify its struggle for the freedom, rights, and dignity denied to them by a brutal minority regime that is bent on perpetuating its neo-totalitarian minority ethnic domination and maintain state power by any and all means necessary, even at the cost of a national break-up or civil war. The excesses of today's rulers in Ethiopia are too much for their Western allies to contend with. It's easier to just sweep them under the rug and pretend they don't exist. But they do exist, and, as a matter of fact, are increasing in magnitude. The coming convergence of the above-described fault lines will undoubtedly drive Ethiopia further toward instability, civil strife, and even worse scenarios.

The stakes are too high for the US, UK, and other western allies of the TPLF/EPRDF regime to just sit back and watch as a simmering volcanic eruption rocks Ethiopia and spews national chaos and instability spread to the sub-region. It is in the strategic interest of these countries, including the international partnership on counter terrorism, that Ethiopia has a stable, popular and democratic government elected by free, fair and transparent process. Peace and stability in Ethiopia could only endure under the rule of law and established rule of the games in economic and other spheres that are fair and just for all Ethiopians in an open and competitive economic and political system.

The United States, the UK, Canada and other donor nations and allies to the minority regime must, therefore, look beyond their misguided and short-term interest and support the establishment of an inclusive transitional Ethiopian government that would pave the way toward a genuine constitutional democratic political order and replace the sham democracy and federalism that has masked the plunder and repression of an entire country by a minority clique. This is the only realistic way to reverse the downward trajectory of chaos, civil war, even worse nightmarish scenarios that may engulf Ethiopia before it becomes "too little, too late" to prevent. Only the determined, combined effort of Ethiopians who have a realistic understanding of the current situation under the minority regime, Ethiopia's foreign friends and other interested stakeholders can stop it before it is too late. A "brittle", neo-totalitarian minority regime rejected by the majority and facing so many internal fault lines that are ever widening and deepening in magnitude cannot be a durable ally for real peace, security, and stability in the volatile Horn of Africa that has seen one too many failed states.