

ETHIOPIA: Why Regime Change Won't Work

By Tesfaye Habisso, 03/04/ 2016

. "If you take power by violence, you will rule by violence, and you can only be removed by violence." (Pik Botha, foreign minister of South Africa, Time, June 30, 1986)

. "There is a new and unique development in human history that is taking place around the world; it is unprecedented in reach and volume, and it is also the greatest threat to all global power structures: 'THE GLOBAL POLITICAL AWAKENING'[Andrew Gavin Marshall]

Whenever Ethiopians at home and abroad make relentless calls these days for regime change by any means, fair or foul, it instantly reminds me of the student movements of the 1970s and their bitter struggles for the ouster of Haile Sellassie's monarchical regime without deeply assessing and ensuring whether such regime change would precipitate the transfer of power to a cohesive and strong political party or group and to the emergence of a genuine people's republic where the people's will would become supreme or else fall into the wrong hands. Sadly, even though the revolution was natural and organic, due to the democratic deficit prevailing in the country since the past several decades, the demise of the imperial regime, however much the common people rejoiced at its downfall due to the end of the age-long exploitative and oppressive feudal system, gave way to the rise of ruthless military tyranny under Col. Mengistu Hailemariam in 1974; it did not result in the establishment of a people's republic as there was no semblance of democracy bequeathed to us by our forebears as well as no political party or parties to assume the vacuum created by the downfall of the monarch of the day. The ruthless military junta ruled the country with iron fist for 17 years destroying in its path the few political parties that arose prior and post Derg until it was ousted by the TPLF/EPRDF forces in 1991; it was a joyous and immensely gratifying historical moment for the long repressed and oppressed peoples of the country. But, again for the same reason of democratic deficit prevailing in the country, what transpired after the forceful regime change of Col. Mengistu's tyrannical government by the TPLF/EPRDF forces in 1991 was not a transition to democracy and democratic people's government but the establishment of an authoritarian ethnic-based regime or hegemony by the victorious militant groups. Again, due to the age-long democratic deficit in the country and the absence of a strong and cohesive multi-national party or parties composed of a critical mass of committed and patriotic democrats with a clear national vision and agenda for building democracy and kick-starting economic development and to challenge the militant victors or to form a coalition government with the latter in 1991 was missing. Thus, the history of the last 25 years under a pseudo-democratic dominant party regime has become the only option for us till now.

This is the same democratic deficit that confronts us Ethiopians at home and abroad today. The tragedy is that all those splintered and hostile political groups who still fight among themselves unable to reach at a national consensus on the rules of the game and who, yet, call for immediate regime change under the guise of bringing democracy

to our people and country seem absolutely blind to the prevalence of this deficiency in the nation's political history and, worse still, to the grim possibility of hurling the country into anarchy or brutal tyranny. Let us, for instance, ask ourselves, which viable political opposition parties or groups are well prepared, cohesive and unified enough to effectively replace the current rulers of the country or fill the political vacuum if the latter are somehow kicked out by force? What would be our fate if our attempts at regime change are successful or quashed: worse tyranny or hegemony, anarchy or total dissolution of the long-held empire-state of the Menelikian era? Though no one may doubt or question the sincerity and yearning of many of the opposition groups to see a democratic and prosperous Ethiopia soon, such a bonanza cannot possibly occur to us soon and most of all via violent regime change.

Whatever the case, the aforementioned 'new and unique historical development' has unfolded in North Africa and the Middle East since last January, 2011. This development which has engulfed almost all the Arab Region on both sides of the Red Sea from Morocco to Tunisia to Egypt, and from Yemen to Saudi Arabia to Bahrain has been sarcastically dubbed "The Islamic Awakening" or "The Arab Spring", and this new awakening has enabled the Arab masses to rise up against their long-reigning despotic rulers and tyrants, and to oust these deeply entrenched patriarchs from power in a matter of a few weeks and months. Unfortunately however, these mass uprisings and street demonstrations have not yet produced any stable and democratic government in any one of the affected countries; the flames of what are conveniently called 'pro-democracy movements' and 'revolutions' are still burning the socio-economic and political structures of these countries in turmoil. In fact, in Tunisia and Egypt the heretofore much dreaded fundamentalist Islamic groups such as the Salafist ENANDA Party and the MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD have emerged as decisive forces to shape the future of their respective countries along the path of Islamic theocracy or fundamentalist Islam, eventually throwing Egypt to autocratic military rule; Libya has been hurled into internecine tribal conflicts raging all across the country with no end in sight; Yemen and Syria today resemble the 'killing fields' of the Pol Pot Regime of Cambodia in the 1970s.

So, what is there to emulate from the experiences of these states, even if such copying were a feasible option, for us in Ethiopia in particular or in Sub-Saharan Africa in general? Nothing at all, except regime change for the sake of it or even a worse situation of engulfing the country into social anarchy and chaos. Furthermore, there seems no end in sight to these civil wars, destructions and chaos in North African countries, and I am afraid, the 'revolutions' will continue like prairie fires wreaking immense havoc and hardship upon the target societies for a long time to come as numerous foreign powers have chosen to intervene and mess up the already chaotic situations by fretting to manipulate and gear the outcome to their own selfish economic and strategic interests under the guise of 'promoting democracy' in the Arab/Islamic world. Strangely enough, some Ethiopian dissident groups also, unaware of the differences in the social structure, economic development, culture and political history between the Arabs and Ethiopians, are sounding the alarm signals of 'regime change in Ethiopia through mass uprisings and street demonstrations' or by any means possible, effectively assisted by powerful propaganda aired via such media channels as ETHSAT

and OMN based in US America and Europe, as if any sub-Saharan African country could copy the North African experience in toto. This simplistic approach to a complicated social malaise is absolutely hard to swallow.

It is indeed absurd that the so-called Ethiopian Youth National Movement (EYNM) has formulated and planned for mass uprisings and street demonstrations in Ethiopia to precipitate a peaceful regime change, not through periodic elections as stipulated in the FDRE Constitution but via mass uprisings and unconstitutional means, in a country that has never before seen any peaceful transitions or alternations of power over a period of a century of its existence as a centralized state. As we all know, Ethiopia's history of the past has always been that of political power changing hands through the barrel of the gun, and whichever group or power elite had the military superiority held the scepter of state power and established its own hegemony; there has never been an institutionalized modus operandi of peaceful and democratic regime change. That is, and has been, Ethiopia's history from Emperors Tewodros to Yohannes, Menelik II to Haile Sellassie I and then from Haile Sellassie's monarchical rule to the Military junta to the emergence of the EPRDF militant forces in 1991. It was the history of alternating hegemonic control of the state power of Ethiopia by the Gondarian, Tigrean, Shoan, military and now Tigrean elites since the end of the era of princes in 1854.

Now, after two decades and half years of the incumbent regime's rule, a call is being made by opposition parties, dissident groups, separatists, and armed movements at home and abroad for a quick regime change in Ethiopia. Some of these groups such as the ONLF, OLF, EPRP, EPPF, and Guenbot 7 want to remove the incumbent party and government through armed struggle. A few others amongst the Ethiopian Diaspora seek the interventionist salivation of the international community and foreign powers to oust the current rulers and present Ethiopians 'democracy' and 'freedom' on a silver platter. They appeal to Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, the UN Human Rights Commission and the European Union, etc. to rebuke and discipline the ruling elite in Ethiopia for allegedly back-tracking on the process of democratization that was spearheaded in 1991. Whatever the merits or demerits of the aforementioned opposition movements and dissident groups, certain salient points should be clearly and unambiguously raised and discussed for the good of the country. Yes, "the era of tyranny and despotism is coming to an end in nations across the globe and so to[o] must it end in Ethiopia", as well put by the EYNM. Yes, we Ethiopians should be able through our hard-won struggles to enjoy the fruits of liberty, physical security, democracy—procedural and substantive democracy— and freedom, and to partake of qualitative and quantitative access to the nation's economic and political resources. Furthermore, the incumbent party and government must make a conscious and genuine decision to start strong democratic institutions that would enable us to adopt and implement meaningful democracy as a form of government as well as a form of everyday life in Ethiopia. To this end, it must create favourable conditions for all voices of responsible dissent and for all the opposition parties or groups to smoothly operate without any impediments in the nation's political arena. No political party should have absolute control over political power in our country as it cannot formulate policies and strategies that may be 100%

correct, as no political party can claim to be omniscient or all-knowing; this is not possible at all. Above all, there is no gain in hindering peaceful options of social change and unwisely inviting violent revolutions in the end. It must also satisfactorily address the prevailing rampant unemployment and intolerable costs of living, lack of justice, massive corruption, rent-seeking, disparities in sharing the economic and political resources among the various regions and peoples and numerous other malpractices wrecking the state bureaucracy. Above all, the ruling party and government should safeguard the FDRE Constitution, ensure democratic/good governance and implement the laws of the land meticulously and desist from the virtual control of political power in its hands and from banishing opposition parties to the fringes of the nation's politics. It must immediately stop its hitherto spree for detention, torture and unlawful killings of its political opponents and unarmed protestors. There is no question about that the ruling party and government should be criticized for its failings in this regard.

What is questionable and unpalatable to many of us, both supporters as well as opponents of the incumbent regime at home and abroad, is: Why agitate for violent regime change via unconstitutional means when we all damn well know such actions all over the world have mostly resulted in total anarchy and social disorder or worse, in the destruction and breakup of sovereign nations. Besides, since the last 25 years, multi-party electoral democracy is constitutionally guaranteed and four successive national elections have so far taken place in Ethiopia since 1995, however much they have been controversial and unpalatable to the opposition bloc and many observers. Above all, what pricks our minds deeply and saddens our hearts intensely is when Ethiopians appeal for alien assistance of intervention to realize democracy and freedom in their own country. If Ethiopians are not prepared to pay the ultimate price in their limbs and their property, and to put their lives on the line for the cause of democracy and freedom, political and civil liberties, and social and economic rights who is going to do that on their behalf? What is this plea for Western tutelage and clientele prostration? Where in the world has such regime change through the interventionist missions of the so-called 'democracy promoters' succeeded in implanting democracy worthy of the name? In Iraq, Ukraine, Georgia, former Yugoslavian republics, Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya? Nowhere at all! What sort of generation has come to the forefront in the nation's political arena today? What has happened to our age-long national pride, passion and patriotism for independence and respect for our sovereignty? Do we sell our soul for Western tutelage and to obtain some crumbs from foreign powers, and hurl our nation into endless strife and turmoil? What a calamity in our nation's glorious history and proud heritage! All past generations of Ethiopians have always stood up for their rights and freedoms; they died in millions for the cause of the masses, and never invited foreigners to fight for their God-given and inalienable human rights.

Here, it must be firmly asserted again and again that real democratic change will only come from within and not without; it is an organic growth in the process of social development. It cannot be imposed from outside; no street demonstrations and mass uprisings can bring about functioning democracy in a short period of time; democracy evolves over time and it exacts huge costs. It is only those who are prepared for the long haul that can succeed in making democracy a reality in their country. Above all, as

Marxists and others familiar with popular movements have long recognized, revolutions are the result of the consummation or fulfillment of certain objective conditions or requisites. Indeed, no amount of agitation for mass uprisings and street demonstrations will provoke the masses to rise up against the status quo unless the latter can clearly make the cost-benefit judgments on their own and undoubtedly see massive benefits as the outcome of their bitter struggles. Yes, no amount of money promised to the people could force hundreds of thousands of people to leave their jobs, homes, schools, and families to confront heavily armed military or police and tanks and put their lives on the line unless they have a deeply felt and genuine motivation to take the risks, whatever the consequences. Nobody in his/her right mind can think that such a situation has unfolded in Ethiopia today. Besides, what strong political and civil society organizations or business conglomerates and community based social groups are there in Ethiopia today to articulate the topical mass-based issues of the day and to mobilize, sponsor and guide the masses to the ultimate victory, whatever that victory may be. Moreover, how can the opposition parties and foreign-based dissidents or any other groups insure that the indomitable army and police forces are on the side of the dissident groups and the sponsors and leaders of these change seekers? After all, the military and police are the linchpin in making or breaking the outcome of such revolts and uprisings.

Without considering all these factors or variables in the power equation, agitating for mass uprisings and street demonstrations in Ethiopia today is nothing less and nothing more than foolishly repeating the catastrophic CUD blunder during the 2005 national elections and thereafter. 'Those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them', as the saying goes. Such agitation for forceful regime change under the guise of peaceful mass protests and demonstrations is undoubtedly a recipe for national disaster that should be avoided at all costs. Finally, Ethiopia today means many things to many groups and individuals. For some, it is a fast developing and democratizing developmental state. For some still, it is a democratizing and federalizing polity in the making. For others, it is an old Abyssinian empire-state that should be dismantled into its component parts, as the ONLF and OLF used to propagate. For others still, it is a fractured and fragmented polity held together by the iron hand rule of the TPLF-dominated EPRDF coalition, and sadly continuing fractionalizing along ethnic, tribal and clan/sub-clan lines wherein one ethnic group or tribal community or clan is pitted against each other for the sake of 'divide and rule' of the incumbent regime.

Under these divergent and divisive political stances, it is quite dangerous to come up with crude prescriptions of unconstitutional regime change or any other short-cut political formulae. It would be wise to learn from the follies of Gorbachev before the demise of the USSR. He never imagined that his ideas of transforming the Soviet Union through his novel slogans of GLASNOST (Openness or transparency) and PERESTROIKA (restructuring) would trigger the disintegration of the USSR and the creation of 15 independent republics in its place. In spite of his relentless efforts to salvage the Union, it was too late to avert the catastrophe, to his deeply-felt regrets and lamentations later. It was like spilt milk, and gone forever in the dustbin of tragic history. Let us think twice or thrice before we throw out dangerous and unreliable prescriptions

such as violent 'regime change' under the prevailing circumstances of ethnic-based federalism in Ethiopia.

It took the utmost wisdom and sacrifice of many far-sighted Ethiopians in 1991 to avert the crumbling of the Empire State into its component parts by agreeing on the reconfiguration of the Ethiopian State as a multi-ethnic federal state where all nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia can co-exist together in peace and harmony based on equality and the equitable sharing of the nation's political and economic resources, even if such political equality and economic justice are hard to realize—a mirage of unattainable benefits. Anyway, it was this historic and note-worthy national consensus reached amongst the contending power elites in the wake of the demise of the military junta in 1991 that saved Ethiopia from the most dreaded fate of anarchy, disintegration and destruction that befell the former Yugoslavia and the USSR, tearing them apart into numerous nations after untold bloodshed and misery suffered by these yet unstable peoples. Unless we somehow want that worst-case scenario to happen to Ethiopia now and we all wish to go our own separate ways, agitation for regime change via unconstitutional methods is a recipe for national disaster.

Regime change through unconstitutional means is not an Ethiopian agenda but the agenda of Western Powers bent on manufacturing client regimes in the Third World that are pliable to the economic and strategic interests of their transnational corporations, MNCs and TNCs who make or break sovereign regimes in the World. All far-sighted, proud and patriotic Ethiopians at home and abroad should fight in unison and strength to avoid such politically amateurish attempts at violent regime change in Ethiopia at all costs. Why do we, wittingly or unwittingly, fret to destroy our great country in the name of bringing democracy when the prevailing conditions--social, economic and political--are not yet favourable for the expected instant adoption of this much desired ideal? Democracy will come someday if we patiently struggle for it while keeping our country unified, developed and strong; if we recklessly pursue hostile actions, civil wars and armed struggles, we may lose both- our country and democratic freedom-. God forbid! Finally, let us all, the rulers and the subjects/citizens, stand united and do away with all parochial and destructive divisions amongst ourselves, and struggle harder than ever to realize a prosperous, democratic and stable Ethiopia through peaceful methods, not via violence and bloodshed. For God and Our Country!

"Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." (John F. Kennedy)