

Quo Vadis Ethiopia? (Ethiopia Wodet?)

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye

PART VI (Continued from Part V)

B). On the other hand, the politically ethnic-based secessionist and anti-unity forces or those aspiring to join their ranks ought to know the following factors that would or could make their efforts at secession undesirable and problematic; and their dreams in most cases unrealizable and not worth the unnecessary sacrifices such an undertaking would demand and entail.

I strongly believe that in any country, more particularly in multi-ethnic ones, only democratizing society and instituting a system of justice that fully guarantees equality to all citizens could obviate the need for secession. A free society, however, cannot be envisaged without an empowered people. Because empowering the people is the only sure way that society can be democratized, our collective efforts ought to be at attaining this critically important objective. Empowered people have a better chance of not being easily manipulated or be preyed upon by any group or party whereas people that are not empowered are more vulnerable to political machinations and manipulations; manipulations that at times could lead to the extent of self-immolation and destruction. Moreover, dictatorships of all sorts flourish and have an easier ride on people that are not empowered.

As empowered people have more say in the political affairs of their country - including forming the type of government they want - have more control of their lives and have equal opportunities, population groups of multi-ethnic societies who otherwise could be pushed or enticed to look at cessation as a remedy to rectifying past injustices will have less desire to secede; and any attempt at it by the ethno-elite will have no acceptable rationale or a good enough cause to garner a convincing following. But when the need to do so presents itself with acceptable historical justifications, the decision could mostly be through democratic processes.

Therefore, if we set our priorities at, not symbolically but truly empowering our people and collectively strive for the subsequent democratization of our society as a whole, the need for secession by any segment of our people could be minimal if not mute altogether. One of my arguments against movements of ethnic-based secessions in our present day overall political context, therefore, is that the Ethiopian people must first and foremost be empowered, and should be given a chance to democratize as a society prior to entertaining the idea of secession and before any segment of it is pushed or forced to secede.

Unfortunately, because it dreads diversity in unity and is mostly premised not necessarily on real historical justifications but on a set of differences that one naturally finds in any multi-ethnic society (linguistic and cultural) - including exaggerated, out of context and even fabricated ones - to justify its primary objective of and fixation at secession, the ideology of politicized ethnicity denies this very opportunity to population groups. On the other hand, I believe that social ethnicity accepts and cherishes diversity and has an objective that focuses more on building on commonalities rather than dueling on differences. On surface, the dichotomy between the two strands of ethnicity may appear indistinguishable. But the difference is substantive. Clearly, the philosophies and organizing principles of politicized ethnicity and social ethnicity are dissimilar and proponents on each side conceive solutions to ethnic issues differently and operate in different mindsets. Because of that conceptual difference, the former are backward looking as their focus is more on the past and they stress on differences and have secession as an ultimate goal; whereas the latter, although cognizant of existing differences and past injustices in society, are forward looking and do not see themselves outside the rest of society, thence are determined to redress past injustices and eliminate prevailing inequities within the context and as part of a functioning multi-ethnic society, and by exerting their efforts at seeking solutions from within. And because of that philosophical difference between the two variants of ethnicity, social ethnicity could serve as a building block of the struggle for equality and could greatly help the process of democratizing society as a whole without the need for secession whereas political ethnicity becomes a hindrance to it (democratization).

Some compatriots, especially many among EPRDF cadres and the ethno-elite, may jump into the wrong conclusion that my argument here against politicized ethnicity in the context of secession is aimed at undermining or even as an attempt at, according to them, "reversing the ethnic freedoms that EPRDF has ushered in to Ethiopian nations, nationalities and peoples". But, at the risk of being accused of chauvinism and of oversimplifying this important and sensitive issue, I would say that such crude conclusions, no matter how honest, are erroneous and misleading. That kind of argument based solely on a wholesale acceptance of TPLF/EPRDF self-serving propaganda about its brand of politicized ethnicity or on a misconstrued (at times twisted) concept from a bygone era, could at least blur the healthy debate over the important issue of ethnicity in general; particularly political ethnicity in regard to its negative impacts on our collective struggle for justice, equality and fairness for all, and efforts at democratizing our society that benefit us all. It should also be clear that any denial of past inequalities, injustices and brutalities on our citizens and marginalization of groups, or any outright dismissal or denial of the relevance and the sensitive nature of

the issue of ethnicity could equally smudge the healthy debate to be had among Ethiopians of all political persuasions and could be as unhelpful as the supercharged and highly politicized brand of ethnicity itself.

As Ethiopians, we cannot lose sight of the fact that multitudes have been subjected to generation after generation of marginalization, oppression and subjugation under successive tyrannical and despotic rulers and archaic systems. Although the issue was debated mainly among the elite since the student movement, there is no consensus on the question of nationalities across the political spectrum. The question of nationalities taking a central stage and prominence in the political discourse of any multi-ethnic society that has a history of injustices or one that suffers from ongoing chronic economic problems and abject poverty is normal and only to be expected. Given the unpleasant side of our checkered history, it is understandable if the enduring question of nationalities has remained to be with us for so long and if sectors of our society are wary of and suspicious about central authority that they may associate with and could only have memories of past oppression and injustices. Because of that possible association of central authority with past history of oppression and subjugation, it is to some extent understandable for members of various nationalities in Ethiopia, especially minority groups, but particularly the ethno-elite, to be looking at enter-ethnic relations in a peculiarly very suspicious manner and if they are dubious about unity. Therefore, it may not be that much out of the ordinary for the question of ethnicity to be on our political radar screen for as long as it has.

The problem really is more on why we have allowed the question of politicized ethnicity to come to the level of incapacitating our collective struggle for justice, equality and unity than why it takes center stage in our political dialogue. There is no question that, as Ethiopians we need to appropriately address this important and sensitive issue. By the same token, we should neither shy away from this important issue because it is sensitive, nor should we continue with the unprincipled and futile effort of political placation simply because we do not want "to offend" the ethno-elite. As a society, we have to engage ourselves in a bold national dialogue in an honest but forward looking manner to properly address it. The ongoing effort to placate the ethno-elite and the unprincipled position pursued by many organizations and progressive Ethiopians could have, albeit inadvertently, contributed to the intransigence and aggrandized self-importance of some ethnocentric organizations that for far too long are allowed to hold the national struggle for justice, equality and unity hostage.

Any wholesale effort at redressing past injustices by overemphasizing politicized ethnicity to the level of fixation where every aspect of enter-ethnic relations is defined by and every social intercourse is tabularized and

weighed against is counterproductive as it rather unnecessarily accentuates and cements existing divisions and creates an environment of suspicion and unease among the country's different population groups. Additionally, because in politicized ethnicity group rights take precedence over individual rights, individual rights, especially that of members of minority population subsets could be trampled upon and sacrificed for "the greater good" - in the name and under the guise of ethnic integrity and solidarity. This negates the very principle of equality of all citizens and invalidates the quest for fairness to all persons as individual citizens. Moreover, the question of ethnicity in our country has clearly been highly politicized causing societal polarization. And it is unthinkable to democratize a polarized society. Therefore, it is my argument that politicized ethnicity is an obstacle to our collective emancipation as a people, as Ethiopians.

I understand how some of the arguments of those critics could be based on the mistaken belief that EPRDF has empowered "nations and nationalities". Those proponents might even cite examples directly taken from EPRDF's self-serving propaganda machine to support their claim and justify their point. Although there were no legally stipulated limitations imposed on any population group by any previous central government of Ethiopia, there is no denying that more than ever before various nationalities are now openly and manifestly using their own indigenous languages and developing and nurturing their cultures and openly participating in the country's political life in a more visible manner. This, no doubt, is very positive and indeed encouraging when taken at face value. But, it is only skin deep. Because it was anchored on a policy of highly politicized ethnicity that calculatedly and dubiously de-emphasized unity, it is purely and simply a politically motivated endeavor designed not to really empower "nations and nationalities" (never mind the Ethiopian people as a whole) but to foster division among different segments of the people of the country for the sole purpose of systematically keeping us divided on ethnic and linguistic lines as a means of assuring the continuance of TPLF's minority rule. Unquestionably, dividing our people on ethnic/linguistic lines and rigorously enforcing this divisive policy as a governmental structure and an administrative tool under the guise of "empowering nations, nationalities and peoples" has so far served, as intended, the ethno-rulers perfectly well.

It should be clear that Ethiopians of all ethnic/language groups have the inalienable right to speak their respective languages and preserve, develop and nurture their cultures. Every ethnic/language group has a heritage that each is expected to cherish and uphold. That should be honored and all of us should respect all Ethiopian languages and cultures. As Ethiopians, we should be proud that our country is so diverse, and we should cherish all of them as they all belong to all of us. We are blessed with eighty plus linguistic

groups that we should see and cherish as a beautiful bouquet of flowers. Ethiopia is the flowerbed that nurtures those beautiful flowers and the crystal vase that holds and beautifies them. And the safe keeping and care of this flowerbed and solid crystal vase should be our collective responsibility. As the beauty of a bouquet of flowers can be appreciated collectively and enjoyed only when they are held together in a container (vase), where each stem enjoys ample space and equal treatment, so should all ethnic/language groups in our country, Ethiopia. No malady afflicting a single stem or a selected few among the bouquet could spare the rest, nor should each be specially treated.

There has been an ongoing debate over the need for a national (official) language and if Ethiopia should or could have more than one. Some may cite a small country like Switzerland that has three distinct population groups to justify the need for having multiple common languages in Ethiopia; without due regard to history, particularity, practicality and costs associated with such an undertaking. How urgent and burning this question is in relation to other fundamental and existential issues we as a country and people are facing may be debatable. Nonetheless, it is my belief that we as a society can be better served if the debate on this important issue is conducted in a non-ethnocentric environment.

We all know that societies are composed of family units (and individuals) and people of a country are a collection of family units with shared history, hopes and destiny. Members of a given household in any society - without due regard to background - are expected and do need to have a common language to lead a normal and harmonious life as a family unit. So do people of every multi-ethnic nation. Having a common language is essential to multi-ethnic countries that aspire to have healthy inter-ethnic relations, stability, sustainable economic development and social progress. No multi-ethnic country can truly be united without a common language bonding its people or when children of each of the different segments of its population (ethnicity) are denied the opportunity to learn the common (national) language or limits itself to using only its own local language in all spheres of the life of society. As much as every Ethiopian language/ethnic group has a right to be proud of its diverse cultures and for all ethnic groups to use their respective languages, they also have - as a people of one country - the responsibility to have a common language to communicate among themselves and develop common and shared culture or cultures.

The need for having a common language is, evidently important and its advantages are multiple. One of the many significant advantages of having a country-wide common language for any heterogeneous society is its critical importance in enabling the people to effectively coordinate their struggle

against tyranny and for a peaceful and durable change to materialize. Here, I am sure a sensible argument can be made that people of different language groups in a country could effectively coordinate their struggle against any tyrannical and oppressive system without the need for having a common language. Yes, it is possible; but, although such a coordinated struggle could succeed in doing away with "the common enemy" without the need for having a common or shared language that binds all sectors, it does not necessarily result in empowering the people as a whole, and the "cooperation" may not go beyond the stated objective – that of removing, say a regime. In fact, such "cooperation" could only be short-lived and would not necessarily yield in the democratization of society as a whole as the main agenda item of the struggle and its primary objective are the defeat of the "common enemy" personified in a central government or a dominating ethnic/language group; the very end of which could be the beginning of a new round of more serious problems where each component language/ethnic group can turn against each other.

As expedient as such short-lived cooperation of various ethnic/language groups could be against a "common enemy", absence of the psychological bond a common language fosters among the people of a multi-ethnic country could result in encouraging and enticing each ethnic/language group to build more walls of separation and go its way; or give a formidable opportunity to secession-minded groups to be more intransigent and push their separatist agenda. Although defeating a "common enemy" may not necessitate a common language, democratization as people of a country requires in each of us a mindset that transcends ethnicity, religion and region. The philosophy of political ethnicity is intrinsically incompatible with the very idea of pluralist society and unity. Having a common (national) language fosters bonding among various ethnic groups leading to better unity for a shared future. That shared future can only be shaped when people have a common purpose; but political ethnicity denies each one of us that indomitable power of unity of lasting purpose. Therefore, having a lingua franca (a national language) in a multi-ethnic country is essential not only to effectively coordinate the people's struggle against tyranny, it is also necessary to continue the struggle for justice, equality and for perfecting their union. It is also critically important in that it helps to develop and nurture kinship and more inter-ethnic bonding among different ethnic groups, creates conducive environment for better understanding of each other and further cements human relations and fosters collective psyche and common identity as citizens of one country.

Can anyone envisage a United States with every segment of society - the French, the Germans, the British, the Italians, every indigenous native American, Africans, etc. wanting a language of their own in each State or a state to be formed for each language group, and without the English language being the lingua franca? Of course not! They could not even have

won their independence from the British, but definitely they may not have gone beyond a tenuous Confederacy.

But what should be abundantly clear to every Ethiopian, as people in any multi-ethnic society, is that having a common (national) language should in no way be taken to mean that the other languages spoken by various population groups in the country are to be dumped or undermined. No. As I said before, each language should not only be treasured but should also be given the opportunity to develop to its full potential.

Although I have stated several times before, my views on the issue of politicized ethnicity are as simple as they are direct. I want to reiterate that there is nothing new about ethnicity on its social settings and that there is nothing wrong about proudly identifying oneself with the ethnic group one happens to come from and preserving and nurturing one's language and cultures - notwithstanding the undeniable fact that no one has ever had or could have a say in where one was born or in to what ethnic/language group and which family. What I have issue with, as far as the question of ethnicity is concerned, is only political ethnicity because of its inherent divisiveness and negative impact on our collective struggle for a democratic system that seriously impact society. That is what I am opposed to.

Nonetheless, some may still confuse the two and try to wrongly interpret what I am saying here as a "chauvinistic" approach to the question of ethnicity. Social ethnicity is healthy and has existed and will continue to exist in our country as long as we opt to live as a multi-ethnic society. Furthermore, not only enjoying but also maintaining and nurturing one's language and cultures should be welcomed and encouraged. All languages spoken by our people in the country and all cultures and customs associated with each ethnic group are our collective treasures and are to be equally respected and celebrated. It is from this basic premise and perspective that I am consistently trying to address the ills of political ethnicity and secession based on it. Movements based on strictly political ethnicity would culminate in secession; without delivering promised freedoms and with far reaching consequences that would affect all involved. What is more is that secession through connivance or violence cannot be expected to deliver freedoms and liberty and will not be desirable to any society that is beset by tyrannical rules and abject poverty.

As was discussed earlier, ethnic-based secessionist movements that are aimed at seceding a part of our country inhabited by a more or less homogenous population like the Ogaden, the Afar or Tgrai could perhaps have a relatively better chance of attaining their short term objective than non-ethnic region-based ones like Gojjam, Gonder, Harar, or even ethno-

regions that are inhabited by diverse population groups like the Oromo, the Harrari or the SNNPS. However, in all ethnic-driven secessionist cases there are several concentric lines of obstacles, among which are the following points that proponents will have to contend with, should seriously think through and ponder before embarking on the endeavor.

First, secession as a means of redressing injustices and addressing pertinent issues is problematic.

In an economically underdeveloped multi-ethnic society, ethnic-based secession by and large has not solved social and political problems either in the macro or micro sense. In most cases secession only shifts and changes ownership of the source or the responsible party for the problems; be it lack of democracy, human rights abuses, economic deprivation, inequity, etc., without changing the very nature of the problems. One's "own" may have replaced "the enemy" in perpetrating the injustices one is set out to fight against, or some of "our own" may be the new exploitative class of a wealthy ruling elite that unfairly enriches itself at the expense of everyone else. Secession had not necessarily been the ultimate solution to inherent social, political and economic problems. Once the bogeyman in the form of a central government or a "dominant" ethnic/language group is no more on the political scene to be the common enemy that everyone has to rally to fight against and once "independence" is somehow gained, problems of rule of law, human rights, individual freedoms and justice become everyone's preoccupation in the new "independent" entity. Sadly, those lofty ideals - but basic necessities for any free people - would remain elusive.

Some may casually argue that if a segment of our society decides to secede from the country, the "rest" of us should not bother and it is not our business to be concerned about "them" whether they have a democratic system or not. Conversely, some secessionists may also argue that they may prefer to be under any system as long as that system is run by "their" people and may ask us not to "meddle in their affairs" and to "respect" their "choice". I find both arguments to be cavalier and irresponsible. I cannot agree with such callous remarks on four counts. First, we know too well how population groups can be forced at gun point to secede; therefore any secession through undemocratic means should not be acquiesced or recognized. Secondly, undemocratic and oppressive rule on any human being anywhere should be a concern of every person. Thirdly, who else is to be more concerned about Ethiopians than us? Because they are our brothers and sisters - part of us, our own - it is not only our concern but our obligation to take up the issue as our own, as it truly is. Fourthly, it should be the concern of the "rest of us" for any undemocratic rule in any seceding part has a direct negative influence on the "rest".

Had secession been an answer to solving problems including basic human needs like human rights and personal freedoms, Eritrea would have been a beacon of democracy and its people would have enjoyed their God-given freedoms by now. But that is not the case. Has Ethiopia hindered Eritreans from having and enjoying those fundamental ideals in the last almost twenty years since they got "independence"? Evidently not!

Ethiopians of all ethnic groups, like people in any multi-ethnic country, have seen and continue to experience oppressions and injustices of varying degrees both as individuals and groups. Fighting oppression in all its forms is justifiable and legitimate and should be every citizen's right and obligation. However, wanting to secede from a multi-ethnic country simply because of past injustices or one happens to have a different variation of cultures or speaks a different language would be too simplistic. Politicizing and focusing on linguistic and cultural differences alone can only lead to polarization and more division. As distinct as they were, if the thirteen confederated states stressed on their differences at the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia – and there were many – then there would be no United States as we have come to know it. How much have the Pakistani or Bangladeshi masses benefitted from seceding from the Indian sub-continent? Are they better off now with separate identities than their Indian brethren?

Many compatriots cite oppression and lack of freedom as the principal reasons for their involvement in ethnic politics, and further justify the need for having an ethnic-based political organization (mostly armed ones) as the only way to "free their" people from oppression and domination by a government that is of or dominated by a certain language/ethnic group. According to them, because the government is a personification of that dominating ethnic/language group, their struggle against that ethnic/language group as a whole would be justified. What makes this kind of argument unreasonable or at least unconvincing is that the ascension to power of such a government would not be through a free, fair and democratic election or the free will and accord of the population. Almost all such governments come to power through undemocratic means - either through coup d'états or armed struggles or in some cases through traditional customs like in monarchical systems.

When, in a heterogeneous society or a multi-ethnic country, an ethnic-based armed struggle against a central government that is assumed to be or is in reality dominated by certain ethnic/language group is waged, and when successful, the result would be either outright secession or another ethnic dominated government that lacks legitimacy and falls short of getting acceptance by all language/ethnic groups in the country. Such governments are not accountable to the people and are, therefore undemocratic by their

very nature. The population group they claim to represent has no direct say or discernible democratic participation. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to hold accountable an ethnic/language group as a whole from which such a government is drawn for whatever an ethnic-based group does or might have done. Moreover most of such self-appointed groups are innately undemocratic and usually led by a tiny clique of unscrupulous megalomaniacs. How can, for example, one hold Tgrawi peasants in Adwa, let alone all Tgreans, responsible for what Meles does? Would it be fair as some seem to suggest now that Tgreans as a whole are responsible and answerable for whatever TPLF leaders have been doing since they assumed state power? If, God forbid, another ethnic-based government, say OLF or a strictly political Amara or Wolayita organization, is allowed to replace the incumbent, would the entire ethnic/language group these organizations claim to represent be responsible for whatever leaders of these organizations do? Would not that be collective condemnation with a potential for group prosecution and collective punishment that could be a prelude to genocide? Would not that be at least reverse political-ethnocentricity?

Currently, there are those who sincerely believe that the best way to do away with TPLF's ethnocentric domination is to challenge it by politically organizing oneself on ethnic lines – following the same organizing principles that TPLF and its likes adhere to; each ethnic/language group "taking care of its own". I would say that at this moment there can be nothing more helpful to TPLF leaders to keep opposition to their misrule ever divided and to assure their continued stay in power unthreatened than this line of thinking. Moreover, it would be one more detracting factor to the collective struggle for causes of justice, democracy, equality and unity of the Ethiopian people at large. If we accuse TPLF leaders for being politically ethnocentric, have a narrowly-focused agenda that does not promote equality among all Ethiopians and falls short of seeing every citizen on equal footing, then how different can we be if we are organizing the same way? As I have mentioned before, TPLF leaders act the way they do not because they happen to come from Tgrai. It is the organizing principles they chose and embraced that led them to behave and act the way they do. Therefore, trying to adopt the same organizing principles for the purpose of fighting the same system is like trying to fight darkness with darkness. Only light and not darkness - no matter how intense it might be - is the best way to fight darkness. As I said before, political ethnicity sharpens existing differences among different population groups taking it to a new dimension that everything (including inter-ethnic relations) is seen from a strictly ethnic perspective where more focus is given to differences rather than commonalities. As divisive and polarizing as political ethnicity generally is, it crystallizes, encapsulates, creates and accentuates disharmony among population groups and erodes inter-ethnic relations; thus becoming a constrictive catalyst that limits

citizens from exploiting their full potential. Like race and fervently religion-based movements, political ethnocentricity has a great potential to bring out the beastly and worst sides of human emotions that lead to genocide, and results in taking any multi-ethnic country backwards.

As the old adage "you don't know who is swimming naked until the tide goes out" clearly illustrates, the presumption that ethnic-based movements would usher in equality, justice and fairness to the masses in whose name the struggle (to "free" them) is waged could be an illusive adventure the regrettable result of which is to be known only after the fact. Therefore, banking on secession alone to redress injustices, particularly social ones, would be a risky endeavor that more often than not yields more misery and hardship to the toiling masses. Secession that comes as a result of armed struggle ends up having an undemocratic government controlled by a distinct clique of crooks soon becoming a new privileged class that sucks the will and wealth out of the masses. Such groups usually have one absolute dictator at the helm that would stay in power as long as he lives. Governments, especially ethnic-based ones that come to power through violence and armed insurrections are controlled by a vilely clique that can only be equated with the "Napoleons" of George Orwell's Animal Farm. Because of the violent nature of such modes of struggle that necessitate taking human life, leaders of those organizations are there for life. They have more personal worries not to leave their leadership positions for fear of being held accountable for whatever their organization might have done in the name of the struggle. They have no incentive big enough to entice them to leave office as staying in power alone as long as possible is deemed to be the only guarantee to their personal safety. Therefore, the fate of any ethnic entity that secedes through undemocratic means would be determined not by the free will of the population but the desires and wishes of the "liberators", where democracy and freedom would be only a wish more than a reality, and the sacrifices the population is asked to endure would be for a nominal and symbolic independence. Secession by and large and in most cases would not empower people, but for some ethno-elite it is a short-cut to unbridled political power and unbounded access to wealth.

Although what triggers any movement that eventually creeps towards secession and the quest for it is understandable, and in most cases driven by a genuine desire for justice, the result would not always be what was promised and expected, and in many instances people generally end up in worse overall situations. Contrary to the pompous claims by the ethno-elite (claims that are mainly empty), secession may not necessarily be the best or only remedy to redress injustices. Because secession is an emotional undertaking, it can play a diversionary role that would force the altering of priorities and changing the focus from solving real problems to mere

sloganeering. At times trying to find justice out of mere secession is just like 'barking up the wrong tree'. The intricacies caused by secession from a multi-ethnic society and the drive to it could mask the struggle for solutions to the more pertinent socio-economic issues and could result in sidelining the quest for justice and equality that people would have sacrificed for.

No doubt that secession might serve as a shortcut and a conduit to political and economic power to certain elite, whereas for the masses, in lieu of justice, fairness and equality, the end result of the whole exercise could be just having "one's own" as leaders and a symbolic but empty independence. Because of the close association of members, any administration that comes as a result of ethnic-based secession - as in any non-inclusive arrangement - creates a more favorable environment for nepotism and cronyism to thrive. Secessionist leaders should know that what they would be doing is just burying their head in the sand and trying to count the stars. They are in effect shifting direction only to mark-time or march backwards and to wind up with more of the same problems. Sadly, the victims here too would be none other than the masses who sacrifice greatly for the endeavor and carry the brunt of the consequences thereafter.

By their very nature, organizations of political ethnicity like race or religion-based political organizations are exclusive clubs. You see, when someone opts to join any exclusive club that person is willingly and consciously deciding to limit him/herself to certain restrictive perspectives and perceptions that would necessarily put him/her in a different category where anyone "unlike" him/her would be the enemy or a marked potential enemy. Therefore, despite the good intent and honest desire one might have when joining political-ethnic organizations to fight injustices, that person is availing him/herself to a closeted or boxed mindset that in essence would lead to submitting oneself to be a prisoner of a new thinking that allows him/her to hate or to see other fellow humans - his/her own compatriots - in a different category simply for who they are. Thus, substituting his/her own compatriots belonging to 'other' language/ethnic groups for the very system that is responsible for the injustices; and in the process submitting him/herself to the bondages of hatred and willingly denying oneself the full freedom a free person ought to enjoy. How can a person who sees another compatriot as an enemy or a different category of person that has to be feared or "not welcomed" simply because that compatriot happens to belong to another language/ethnic group be truly free? Therefore, the struggle against ethnocentric systems - as in any anti-race or anti-religion-based systems - is as much a struggle on grounds of principle to free victims of the system as it is to free the very members of those organizations who have made themselves prisoners of such hate-based or at least irrationally biased mindset that any member of such organizations is bound to willfully have and possess.

They may not realize it, but ask anyone involved in political ethnicity about his/her childhood friends who happened to belong to "other" ethnic/language groups if they still have the same innocent and untarnished sentiments and feelings towards each other. As members of a race-based group perceive all human relations strictly in terms of race and members of religion-based see things from a strictly singular religious angle, it is an irrefutable fact that members of ethnic-based political organizations and ethno-politicians analogize problems in society and postulate solutions from a strictly ethnic perspective. For ethno-politicians, like members of highly politicized religion or race-based organizations, the alpha and omega of their underpinning theory is derived from a narrow perspective of ethnicity, pure and simple.

In many instances, the initial causes for secession and the drive towards it could be understandable or could even have legitimate justifications. But secession for the sake of cessation alone, especially those led by certain group of elite whose veiled purpose is to satisfy their insatiable desires for power or to satisfy their ravenous selfish needs or ones that are manipulated by foreign hands, have resulted in impoverishing and oppressing the masses even more than before "independence". Therefore, people in the independence-aspiring region of an area of the country ought to be aware of the fact that not all secessions result in bringing better life or better opportunity for them. Because almost all secessions come about through armed struggle and those responsible for the change (the guerrilla force) form the government exclusively, they (the new bosses) run the government in a high-handed and imperious manner with a mindset that everything and everybody should submit to the wishes and desires of the leaders and the "liberation" organization. The supremacy and dominance of such organizations are sacrosanct; even after they come to state power, remain unaltered. Therefore, although "independence" may somehow be possible, the result as regards to the realization of justice, rule of law and personal freedoms may be a different story as any dissent would be easily meted out mercilessly by the new bosses who, under the guise of security and unity, would hasten to accuse those demanding for the most rudimentary of freedoms of "collaborating with foreign enemies" and for trying to "undermine the new-found freedoms and the country's independence".

Second, secession may not guarantee viability.

It would be wise and prudent for those secessionist forces to ask if viability to be an independent entity would be possible before embarking on a secessionist enterprise. Viability depends on having internal stability and a well-defined and delineated borders with no or minimal fluidity. In our particular case, as we have so far seen with each of the nine ethno-regions, not a single one can guarantee that.

Because of that inherent problem none of the regions can effectively be a viable independent entity. Therefore, in the absence of assured viability, a secession-inspired ethnic movement in Ethiopia would be an ill-advised exercise and could not be expected to resolve any of the fundamental questions of freedom, justice and equality that proponents purport to attain as a result of the "liberation" struggle.

Third, secession entails a real danger of and vulnerability to foreign intervention.

Because foreign intervention at least in some of the current ethno-regions is almost a certainty - in some cases even an inevitability - others in turn, especially the relatively smaller or weaker ones, would be forced to seek the "protection" of other foreign powers; further complicating the whole equation and at the expense of sacrificing "sovereignty" and at the cost of freedoms of the people there. For example, an argument over "border" issues between an "independent" Somali region of Ethiopia (which would have at least foreign influences) and the State of Afar could easily escalate to involve further intervention by third parties. Similarly, a near certain "border" confrontation between "independent" Oromo and Somali regions would result in foreign or third party involvements; or "border" issues between SNNPS and Gambella could invite intervention by Sudan or Kenya. Under such circumstances each entity will be bogged down by interminable conflicts with its 'neighbors' that fundamental internal issues of the population, including human rights and bread-and-butter issues, would be ignored or shelved and put on the backburner; thus stifling social upward mobility and progress that could condemn the population to abject poverty.

Fourth, secession could create fertile grounds for extremist influences and radicalization.

Fundamentalist and extremist groups have a far better chance at influencing societies and flourishing in ethnic and relatively smaller enclaves than larger multi-ethnic countries. There are so many factors indicating that "independence" for some ethno-regions would create fertile grounds for fundamentalist and radical sectors to be vying for an outright influence and dominance that would have a potential for immersing the region's population into undesirable and even violent situations. Because of the religious nature of this radicalizing effort by fundamentalist elements, the impact on society will be more substantial and highly consequential. Just like what Al Shabaab is currently doing in Somalia and what Taliban did in Afghanistan, extreme and "puritan" edicts that prohibit what are considered to be customarily normal human activities would be imposed on the population. Such draconian measures would further divide society into 'radicals' and 'moderates' with grievous consequences that aggravate existing problems and create new ones; thus pulverizing society in a more fundamental way. Obviously, this

radicalizing process will cause more trauma, misery and bloodshed, entails abhorrent human rights abuses, curtails civil liberties and personal freedoms and could further impoverish the population.

Moreover, if such a fate befell any one of the current ethno-regions, the influence on the rest is almost immediate. Therefore, each of the nine regions should have legitimate concerns and serious worries of any adjacent region's effort at secession as that would put them in real jeopardy. As things stand now, no region could claim immunity from such vulnerabilities.

Fifth, secession could entail perpetual unrest.

There is a correlation between secession and the danger of foreign-inspired and instigated perpetual unrest. Some regional and international powers and elements would be hard pressed at making sure that no permanent or workable peace existed between and among "independent" regional states just to suit their selfish desires of either to play the role of "big brother" or to exploit the natural riches found in each with much ease and without much control. We have seen how some governments indirectly and companies directly, especially mining and energy companies, fomented armed conflicts in some parts of Africa (Sierra Leone, Congo, etc.). Whilst those conflicts raged and people were embroiled in vicious violent conflicts causing the death of hundreds of thousands and the mayhem and displacement of millions of innocent civilians, those companies continued with their exploitations, in fact hiring some of the protagonists to protect them and their selfish interests. Because of the inter-ethnic or sectarian conflicts, the warring factions are more concerned about having uncontested control over certain mining fields or energy resources that are used to finance their "armies". Those spineless and greedy so-called leaders of those warring factions are so reckless that they show more eagerness to fight against other groups and kill and mayhem their own kin than care about the wellbeing of the people or the environmental and other impacts of the internecine wars they engage in and the mining activities.

Therefore, it would be in the best short-term interests of third parties to see to it that there would be no peace or at least tension is a permanent fixture among seceding new "independent" entities. There are third parties including Isaias Afewerki's Eritrea that are keen at making sure that not only Ethiopia is torn to pieces but also every seceding entity gets bogged down in perpetual conflict with its new "neighbors". Obviously, the more divided the country is the weaker and more desperate the people become and the more likely the possibilities are for each population group to remain not only in perpetual poverty but also would condemn them to virtual dependency on foreign handouts. When and if that is allowed to happen, development would be stifled, social progress becomes an unrealizable dream and our people would

be exposed to more degrading dehumanization and humiliation; thus curtailing their chance to live as free, proud and independent citizens and denying them the opportunity for enjoying their full potential.

Therefore, secession would expose people, especially those living in regions that are otherwise blessed with natural resources, to an avoidable vulnerability as their "independence" could serve as an invitation to some foreign powers to intervene mainly as friends and investors. Those intervening powers come in with the singular aim of exploiting those natural resources and in the process dividing people further and keeping them at perpetual loggerheads with each other as much as possible would be the weapon of choice to assure continued exploitation. But for some of them the main strategic objective of their direct and indirect involvement would be to simply keep Ethiopia unstable and divided.

Sixth, secession could result in ethnic-cleansing and abuse of minority groups.

There is no guarantee that would protect minority groups that live within the current ethno-regions that would be dragged along in the unfortunate event of secession. These minority groups would be more marginalized, oppressed, their rights suppressed and would suffer greatly under such circumstances. That is exactly what happened to the Kunama (proud Ethiopians) in Eritrea, Serbs in Kosovo and Russians in Baltic States. Therefore, minority language/ethnic groups and sub-groups are the first and permanent victims of secession. And there cannot be credible and functioning democracy in the presence of oppression of any segment of a given population. There is no guarantee for the sincere desire and express wish of any subset or minority group of an ethno-region in the event of that region's "independence". And no region can claim to have a democratic system when sections of that society are marginalized, discriminated against or oppressed.

Despite my assessment that made secession for the current ethno-regions impossible for many, improbable for some and unlikely for the rest for the reasons I tried to enumerate earlier, and regardless of the fact that viability would be at least an uphill battle if not unattainable, few regions could still secede. Some compatriots entertain a hypothetical worst case scenario, for example, that TPLF leaders, regardless of the sentiments and true feelings of the people of Tgrai against secession, could still try to secede the region from the rest of the country. As far-fetched as such extremely nightmarish a scenario is for many Ethiopians, they say that TPLF leaders could pull "their" troops from the rest of the country, amass them in Tgrai and declare "independence". Knowing how much control the organization (TPLF) has over the people of Tgrai, opposition from them cannot be openly overwhelming and right away. Proponents of this scenario further theorize that to facilitate and

accomplish this dreadful plan, and to keep opposition to their act of secession at bay or minimal, TPLF leaders could also make sure, as much as they can, that the rest of the country is in total chaos. They could do the same with Eritrea by facilitating its implosion. If such awful fate befell the country, as much of the country's Armed Forces would be pulled out of the Ogaden, the ONLF with the help of Al-Shabaab, Sheabia or others could overrun towns in short order and follow suit to declare "independence", and any ethno-region with an armed contingent, no matter how tattered it may be, could go its way.

Well, if we assume that this could be in the realm of possibility, my question is, then what? True, such a scenario, at least in short term, would throw the country into total turmoil and chaos, with ethnic-cleansing, displacement of millions and inter-ethnic strife compounded by acts of genocide, and foreign involvements of all kinds and under various pretexts taking place almost everywhere. In such a frightful case, it is easy to assume that the first victims would be citizens of Tigrayan extraction. This would be a nightmarish scenario that benefits no one, but still a remote possibility that would not merit closer scrutiny here not because of lack of such a desire on the part of possibly very few individuals among TPLF leadership, but mainly for many factors that work against such madness.

First of all I do not agree with that hypothesis. That might have been plausible say fifteen years ago or so but not at this time and realities on the ground will not permit such a scenario to take place. Such a hypothesis could be premised on the occasional snarling of people like Sibhat Nega that they (TPLF) would not hesitate to see the dissolution of the country if things do not go their way. Would that threatening pronouncement be a hollow bravado aimed at keeping Ethiopians on edge, worried and guessing, or a valid warning that Ethiopians should be seriously concerned about?

Whatever the reason for or the motive behind such irresponsible statements could be, and whether such individuals wish it or not, as time goes by and objective realities on the ground change, there is no realistic chance for such a situation to materialize. Secession may still remain to be the obsession of very few TPLF leaders. But they may not get a substantial following among the organization's membership let alone the populace. After almost two decades in power, a substantial number of TPLF members, especially the upper echelon, have become wealthy and are accustomed to a totally different life style that they will not be willing to jeopardize, easily give up and sacrifice by embarking on such an adventure. For TPLF members, secession would mean forcing them to go to Tgrai all and sundry - denying them the opportunity to live in the rest of the country as they rightly do now as Ethiopian citizens. Besides, secession would mean that they could be forced to give up their political and economic benefits they currently may have in

addition to their Ethiopian citizenship rights. Such stark choices would be a disincentive for any TPLF member not to be a willing participant in any attempt to secede. Therefore, no matter what Sibhat or any other like-minded TPLF leader may wish, secession of Tgrai is almost a thing of the past or at least an unattainable enterprise under the circumstances.

Some compatriots take pronouncements of people like Meeles or Sibhat quite literally and miss the real message. A case in point is how furious many Ethiopians were at what Sibhat said about a year or so ago regarding Eritrea and how more loyal to Eritrean independence they (TPLF) were than Sheabia and how they still are ready and willing to fight in order to make sure that Eritrea remains independent. That obviously was a political message to Eritreans and not Ethiopians. It was especially meant to assuage the fear that some Eritrean opposition groups may have about future Ethiopian desires. That was, therefore, a message particularly to the Eritrean opposition but also to Eritreans at large.

Some take solace in the prosecution at The Hague of some dictators like Charles Taylor and argue that more reckless acts such as attempting to secede Tgrai or further human rights abuses of the Ethiopian people would be counterintuitive for TPLF leaders themselves as they would be prosecuted for those crimes wherever they go. But the fact of the matter is that, as the Ethiopian saying "Yebesebesse Zinab Ayferam" (literally to mean a person who is already drenched is not afraid of more rain) illustrates, there already are plenty of cases they could be prosecuted for if situations warrant and especially if national reconciliation is not allowed to take place.

At any rate, the responsibility and the key for Ethiopia's disintegration is, more than anybody else, squarely in the hands of TPLF leaders. If they continue on a recklessly irresponsible course and do not see Ethiopia and the lasting interests of its people beyond their mortal selves, and if they want their legacy to be one that destroyed a country; a country that survived repeated foreign aggressions and countless internal strife for millennia, then they may go ahead. But would that be their choice and would they opt for consigning such a tarnished and shameful history to their children? Would they have the wisdom to pose for a moment and see outside the box and listen to alternative voices? Consistent with what John Edward Acton once said in a letter he wrote in 1887 that "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely", or what the British PM William Pitt said in a speech to the UK House of Lords in 1770; "Unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it", and given the absolute power they have currently amassed, TPLF leaders may not be expected to act differently unless forced. I sometimes wonder if, despite perceptions we all have about them and the facts that speak for themselves, those in power may be sincerely thinking

that what they are doing is in the best interest of the country and its people. Yet, that only would be consistent with people who possess absolute power.

One of the characteristics of people who exercise absolute power is that they think they cannot be wrong and what they do is always right, only they know what is best for the country and whoever opposes them or proposes contrarian views is against them personally and becomes the enemy of not only them but that of the country and the people. Such people convince themselves that they are the country and people and are destined and have a divine calling to mold the country and society their own way and as they wish. They believe that their plans and ideas alone are the answers and solutions to every conceivable problem. And because of that delusional approach, they try to justify anything they do, including violations of human rights and other criminal and abhorrent acts against their own citizens, as "necessary" acts that "had" to be taken "in the interest" of the people and country. Redolent of delusional behaviors, it is a standard practice and a known fact, that, be it Hitler or Mussolini, Mengistu or Pol Pot (Saloth Star), Meles or Isaias, Mugabe or Saddam Hussein, etc., every dictator has a "justification" for every one of his acts as that done in the "interest of the people and the country"; none ever believed that what they did and do is to satisfy their lust for power and their insatiable desire to perpetuate their rule. It is even probable that some may sincerely believe that what they do is right and continue to do what they do believing in earnest that what they do is in the best interest of the people. No question they work hard and to the best of their abilities. Unfortunately, what they engage in and do have negative consequences hurting the people and country each one of them claims to love.

As much as TPLF leaders may hold the key and may have more responsibility for the continued misery of our people and a possible dissolution of our country, because of either failing to open the political space and democratize, take corrective measures to change course and facilitate national reconciliation; it is my belief that conversely the democratic and unity forces hold the key for and have a solemn duty and responsibility of keeping the country united. And they are correlated. It is only the democratic and unity forces that have the power to compel the regime of Meles Zenawi to change course. That is only possible with a solidly unified national organization of democratic and unity forces (DUF) with a clearly defined strategy. Although that has remained illusive, there is no reason or excuse for failing to do it; and it is doable. The opposition needs to reinvent itself to become a real and viable national alternative democratic force. We need to redefine the alignment of forces based on the ideology each one stands for. Now it is between the ruling party (EPRDF) on one hand and the alternative - the democratic and unity forces (DUF) on the other. Therefore, the country's

fate to go either way is in the hands of these two forces – the ruling party (EPRDF) and the yet to be reconstituted democratic and unity forces (DUF). But, is there a possibility for these two forces to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable differences and avoid going into a collision course? Given the nature of TPLF/EPRDF and the ideology and philosophy it stands for, would rapprochement and reconciliation be ever possible or would it be delusional? There could be, if and only if both sides resolve to submit themselves to the interests of the people, if they PUT PEOPLE AND COUNTRY FIRST, and realize that by the end of the day it is about the country and its people that both sides believe to be doing their best. But that can only be possible when and if arrogance and vengeance give way to sobriety, tolerance and wisdom to allow national reconciliation to take place before it is too late. More than what some among us may think, I believe, the alternative democratic and unity forces have a potentially determinant role to play in this regard. (I will present separately as to how this would be so).

For durable peace and stability, for real equality and social justice and for reliable progress and sustainable development of all areas of the country and the people of Ethiopia as a whole, the solution and the right way forward is unity under a non-ethnic pluralist democratic system. Justice and equality for every individual citizen and every language/ethnic group remain our collective quest; the achievability and realization of which greatly depend on our unity. But our unity based on the equality of all citizens of the country can only be achievable when and if democratic and unity forces on behalf of the main stakeholders - the people of the country - decide and resolve to fight for it in unison as one, transcending ethnicity, region or religion with a shared sense of purpose and responsibility. That kind of collective struggle for our inseparable destiny is the only venue that would guarantee the achievability, soundness and durability of our unity and the realization and viability of the system of government we want for us now and for posterity.

Continues in Part VII (The last of this series)