

THE POWER OF "NO!"

THE PROSPECT OF POPULAR UPRISING IN ETHIOPIA AND THE HURDLES

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye (Part II, continued from Part I)

Because of rampant decadent and selfish cultures that are being systematically infused in to our society, particularly targeting our youth, the state of despondency and the prevalence of widespread hopelessness coupled with the cancer of divisive ethnic politics, some Ethiopians may have given up hope in the ability and willingness of the young generation to act in unison and do anything serious demanding selfless devotion to a common cause. However, I happen to be very optimistic about the potential and will power of our youth of today to live up to its history and surpass most expectations. For some of us who are old enough to recall the state of our youth as late as only a year or two prior to the 1974 revolution, we know how, with the right leadership and inspiration, selfless, dedicated and determined a young generation can become in short order when the time is right. And from all indicators, this is one of those times.

The on-going popular uprisings in North Africa and the greater Middle-East have inspired and will continue to inspire all subjugated and oppressed people everywhere and will encourage them to seek change through unified peaceful struggle. However, despite similarities in demography, the dictatorial nature of the governments, the grievances of the populations emanating from deprivation and untold suffering, total rejection of the status quo by the ruled and the prevalence of a fertile and conducive overall environment for change, etc., objective realities and situations particular to each country will determine the instigation, success and fruition of any popular uprising. North Koreans, Zimbabweans, Iranians, Burmese, etc. continue to suffer under dictatorships not because they do not want to be free or are less courageous. The people in these countries will not be exceptions and remain under dictatorial rules forever. Neither will they be expected to rise up tomorrow.

This Arab Youth phenomenon has changed the world in more than one ways. Although some had to tiptoe and had shown reluctance to quickly and unequivocally embrace the change the people of the region have sought and so heroically fought for, world powers are now compelled to side with the people, and have started to send strong signals to dictators everywhere. The UN Security Council's unanimous decision to freeze the assets of Libyan dictator Gaddafi, his family and close associates is quite a significant and encouraging move. Whether people rise up today or tomorrow, bloody dictators who oppress their people and suck the wealth of their nations now have twice to think about their actions. They may have nowhere to hide or no chance to use the loot they so greedily have snatched from the mouths of their starving populations.

Nonetheless, some quarters argue that, because Ethiopians were able to undo the regimes of Atse Haile-Selassie and Colonel Mengistu, young Ethiopians of today can also do the same. There is no question that they can, and the Ethiopian youths now, at least on the individual level, are no less aggrieved, less courageous or have less aspirations and ambitions. But, the counter argument by many in the democratic and unity circles is that, as we all know, and as it stands now, Ethiopia today, in many respects, is not that of the 1974. There are hurdles that require closer scrutiny and other factors that need to be seriously weighed prior to embracing that kind of wholesale assumption. However, these potential adversities could be totally avoided or curbed if there is consensus on the validity of their serious nature, and if thorough precautionary, concrete and tangible collective measures are taken to counter them. I will propose possible measures Democratic and Unity Forces and Ethiopian patriots could take to counter and circumvent such hurdles and make any popular uprising or peaceful popular movement (struggle) sustainable and successful.

I would argue that the prospect of any popular uprising in Ethiopia poses a greater challenge to Democratic and Unity Forces more than it does even to the ruling clique. That is precisely the reason why these forces have to be very seriously concerned, rethink their alignment and redouble their efforts at carefully deliberating and coordinating their actions. In the eyes of many among Ethiopian democrats and unity forces, the purpose of any popular uprising in Ethiopia should have the **ultimate concurrent, interrelated and inseparable goals of removing tyranny, assuring the peace and unity of the country and the establishment of a just, representative, democratic constitutional order. For them, any uprising short of these goals and aimed at only removing Meles is not only simplistic but also naive and dangerous.** The reasons for their call for caution, especially in view of equating the current situation with that of 1974 or even that of 2005, and the argument about the need for a careful and thorough scrutiny when contemplating any meaningful and successful popular uprising are given as follows:

First, there can be no denying that the youths of today can be as militant, as dedicated and as willing to rise up and fight for what they believe in if and when they are inspired. It is especially true that today's youths have fewer opportunities, have less prospect and hope for a better future than my generation was. Equally true is the fact that today's youths have easier access to modern technology that they can make proper use of to widely communicate with one another and almost instantaneously coordinate their plans and actions. Although that kind of independent maneuvering has its own drawbacks, especially in as far as sustainability of a widespread popular movement and consistency of objectives and their articulation are concerned, it nonetheless allows them to use the full potential of their creativity and gives them the flexibility and adaptability to circumstances without having the need for a formally structured organizational framework. But the sustainability and success of such uprisings depend on **unity of purpose on a national level** and organizational ability and support. What is in contention or the argument here, therefore, is not whether the youths of Ethiopia today can live up to expectations or act in the best tradition of the militant youth of yesterday's Ethiopia. The question is **whether that militancy can be expressed uniformly and in unison across the country under the same unifying slogans and the same unifying objectives far beyond the quest for the removal of Meles and his regime, or if that is going to be fragmented and for differing, disjointed and even antagonistic goals and objectives altogether.** As we all know, the youth then (1974) was not divided on ethnic lines and was able to act as Ethiopians first, as an entity. Whatever came from Addis Ababa University was seen and accepted as a common cause and followed by students in every learning institution in every part of the country more or less uniformly.

Second, Ethiopian unity was not as much questioned and political ethnicity was not the administrative structure of the country, and Ethiopians saw themselves as Ethiopians first and were ready to fight in **unison** for a better **collective future**. In contrast, Ethiopians in the last two decades under TPLF/EPRDF rule are (with the exception of Addis) segregated into ethnic enclaves and **forced to grow apart**, have the disposition to "region/ethnic-first" thinking; causing a coordinated movement **on the national level** for similar goals and objectives difficult, making further division and ethnic strife a possibility and leaving the people vulnerable to the regime's continued and reinvigorated sophisticated divisive schemes to keep unified action at bay.

Third, despite the undemocratic nature of government of Atse Haile Selassie and the brutal and barbaric nature of Mengistu's dictatorial regime, both stood fast for the country's unity and territorial integrity, and there was no doubting that they would knowingly compromise Ethiopian sovereignty. But, knowing too well the fact that the clique currently in power values its monopoly of power more than anything else, including the unity of the country and wellbeing and safety of the people, not only its leaders will not fight for the country's unity when or if their grip on power is in the balance. The regime's leaders have told us, the Ethiopian people that they would be

diligently working at its dissolution if they feel the heat and their hold on power is definitely threatened and compromised. Although their primary effort at staying in power would be to continue with their divisive policies in combination with the use of intimidation and brute force, they would embark on new maneuverings around the opposition by luring some to their side through different bogus schemes and empty promises, superficially relaxing some restrictive laws, introducing some cosmetic "reforms", etc. However, in a desperate act of a last resort and as a last ditch effort to stay in power, the top echelon of the ruling clique will resort to doing anything and everything imaginable to fragment and weaken opposition and prolong their rule. It would be naive not to take into account the possibility of a coordinated and systematic instigation of ethnic and religion-based strife by them, including allowing certain sectors to use Article 39 to foment and encourage secession. Given the viciousness and sickening track record of the current rulers at the top that is rife with irresponsible and treasonous acts, this should not be doubted nor should it be taken lightly.

Fourth, although there were no nationally recognized, known and widely accepted political parties of significance in the country in 1974, there were national institutions spanning the breadth and width of the country that stood guard for the peace, stability and unity of the nation. Beside the presence of traditional national institutions, the youth was nationally galvanized not only as a formidable and viable force for change but also as a unified and unifying entity.

As is the case with any dictatorial rule, the Meles regime has made denying our people real national alternative one of its top priorities. The regime has effectively crushed civil society of national relevance and left the country without dependable national alternative with any sound credibility. There are no known countrywide unions of teachers, students, workers, etc. that can speak in one voice and act in unison at the national level. Moreover, despite repeated past and on-going efforts, currently there is no single party that has a nationwide acceptance with tangible organizational structure, credibility or organizational capacity to assume the daunting task and responsibility of assuring stability, peace and unity of the country.

Fifth, the rulers have systematically dismantled the true national characters of national institutions like the country's Defense Forces and civil and professional institutions like Ethiopian Teachers Association, Free Journalists Association, etc, as they have replaced them with the ones that mirror their ethnocentric and divisive political philosophy. Although there had been efforts at restructuring the Armed Forces to reflect the national character as an Ethiopian institution – which it is - the rulers have exerted an extraordinary control to keep it fragile by instituting an unprecedented ethnic dominance and control. Because of that calculated policy of the ruling clique, there exists an unfortunate widespread suspicion and lack of trust in the country's Armed Forces that they are there to protect the regime more than the country and its people. Although not entirely irreversible, this feeling is very damaging both to the image of the institution and particularly to the future of the country vis-à-vis the success of a possible popular uprising. Unlike Egypt or Tunisia, Ethiopia is systematically denied of a critically important institution in the Armed Forces that is trusted, neutral and accountable only to the nation and its people.

Therefore, unlike 1974, there are no national institutions throughout the country to prevent possible measures of ethnic cleansing by different armed groups including out of control ethno-vigilantes and fringe radical elements and to curb preventable societal strife and safeguard the peace, stability and unity of the country, in the event of disorder that can ensue any disjointed popular uprising. In view of the possibility of restructuring the Armed Forces to reflect the ethnic designs and evil aspirations of the rulers at the top to surreptitiously deny the opposition and the country a national institution that is capable of carrying out its solemn duties and obligations of keeping the unity, stability and peace of the nation, the specter of sectarian strife and foreign involvement under different pretexts is real.

Sixth, unlike 1974, there are several anti-Ethiopian and secessionist armed groups salivating over the opportunity disorder could present to them to advance their cause, are eagerly awaiting to exploit such moments and are ready to step in and wreck havoc in their 'respective' areas as soon as situations allow them.

Seventh, the region is rife with groups and governments that are keen and eager at instigating and exploiting any vacuum or chaotic environment resulting from the absence of order to advance their desire to fragment the country. This is more of a worry in the current environment where there is no viable and credible national alternative in place that is able to muster enough force, moral or otherwise, to circumvent such probability.

Eighth, although successive Ethiopia governments have shown vulnerability to foreign influence and the current one is no exception or even more so, Ethiopia does not have any friendly foreign power by its side that is committed to its unity and territorial integrity. I could be wrong, but, given the foggy idea some powers have to redraw the internal map of Africa, I strongly suspect that Ethiopian unity can be easily sacrificed by those foreign powers if they find the country's dissolution to be conducive to their notion of 'regional stability'. We know, however, such farfetched ideas could only be derived from an erroneous underestimation of Ethiopian nationalism and a false and twisted sense of regional stability.

Nonetheless, these arguments and cautious notations do not advocate inaction, but are presented to remind the obstacles we are bound to face and to ring a bell that there are areas of serious concern that we need to work on in order to avert chaos, thwart any evil designs of either the rulers or other elements to divide us and ultimately circumvent the aspiration of the Ethiopian people to be free and live a dignified life. What is clear is that the Meles regime is not as powerful as some may believe it to be. As it is a regime devoid of real and unshakable popular support and one that depends on brute force and devious divisiveness alone to sustain its rule, it cannot withstand any sustainable popular movement. As I argued elsewhere before, what sustains the regime more than its means of suppression is the absence of a real and viable national alternative and the divisive policies that denied Ethiopians the chance to act together as Ethiopians first.

All democratic and unity forces should be concerned about and work towards is to have a new alignment of forces in a clear and unambiguous manner, and with a clear national agenda. As I have elaborated this aspect of my argument in the "What Next?" series, this requires a clear departure from past useless and self-defeating organizing principles and practices.

What is evident is that the status quo is unsustainable and this regime, despite any concerted efforts, could neither prevent seeping popular anger from exploding nor could it withstand it. What should all bear in mind – be it the regime in power, opposition groups or foreign powers – is that neither a call from afar alone, no matter how intense, could by itself ignite, nor the amount and magnitude of repression by the ruling clique or any cosmetic measures could ever prevent a popular uprising from taking place in Ethiopia. Once people determine that they cannot take deprivation, dehumanization and humiliation anymore, there is no turning back without putting an end to the status quo.

Part III, 'What Are The Obstacles To Any Popular Uprising In Ethiopia?' continues...