

**THE POWER OF "NO!"**  
***THE PROSPECT OF POPULAR UPRISING IN ETHIOPIA AND THE HURDLES***

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

**What Are The Obstacles To Any Popular Uprising In Ethiopia?**

One of the ills of allowing people to stay in power for too long is that, in addition to encouraging nepotism and enabling systemic corruption, those in power would start to have difficulty distinguishing between themselves and the country they rule, and consider any call for change, no matter how genuine, legal and legitimate, to be one against the interests of the people and the country. For them, they are the people and the country. While they are killing, tormenting and torturing their people, they believe the country is at peace as long as they are not fired upon. As long as their looting of the nation continues unabated and they grow richer by the day, they think that there is plenty and everything is bountiful, the people are better-off and happy, when in reality the people they rule are getting wretchedly poorer, go hungry, struggle and find it difficult to make ends meet. And withal, as delusional as dictators are, they only start to understand how rejected they are and the extent and magnitude of hatred the people have to them when it is too late to do anything or after they are altogether removed from power. Colonel Ghadafi, who is in the midst of a popular uprising by the Libyan people to topple him, and while he is engaged in mass killings, has no shame to lie to himself and the whole wide world to openly claim that "everybody in Libya loves" him, and deludes himself that Al Qaida is giving illicit drugs to criminal elements to create trouble" in Libya.

Dictators in theirs last days use either brute force to crush opposition or make unsuccessful efforts to placate their opponents with too little too late promises of reform. The regime in Addis, understandably, should be nervous. As has been proven before, even in isolated cases, no one should doubt the fact that use of brute and lethal force by Meles and his regime is not only in the realm of possibility but a stark reality. That ought to be taken as a given. TPLF/EPRDF rulers have not only the capacity but also a demonstrable will and determination to do so. In order to circumvent popular uprising or a significant opposition to their rule, they would embark on, through intensified propagandist campaigns and employing outright overt and covert coercive and threatening tactics, from personal intimidations to frightening people that the country would lose its unity and descend in to chaos, coupled with temporary incentives, including the introduction of cosmetic 'reforms'. To avoid the fate of Bin Ali and Mubarak, they would continue with their divisive policies; with new twists including some desperate and devilish ones like inciting ethnic and religion-based strife. Unquestionably, TPLF/EPRDF rulers would do anything in their power first to prevent and circumvent Tunisian/Egyptian-type popular uprising through different divisive tactics, especially targeting the youth, and if that fails then they would attempt to crush it with unprecedented brute force when it starts.

However, the biggest challenge and possible hurdle for the full success of a momentous popular uprising in Ethiopia, I believe, does not only come from the regime. It comes from three quarters, each complementing the other but in their separate ways and not necessarily in concert.

The first challenge is from ill-advised actions by some opposition parties - although this could be more or less inadvertent to some among them. It has two aspects; internal and external.

The internal one comes in the form of "new negotiations between the ruling party and the opposition". As Machiavellian as Meles is, it is safe to assume that his first line of active defense against and his proactive maneuvering toward thwarting the specter of popular uprising in the country would be to either directly, but particularly through "Third Parties" engage the "opposition" in meaningless and behind closed doors dialogues and "negotiations". Some among the opposition inside the country, especially and primarily the ones thought to be prominently

"friendly" to the regime (and others too), would be hard pressed, through those 'Third Parties' to enter into this futile exercise. Although the purpose of those "negotiations" would be aimed at buying time and giving the regime a badly needed respite to prevent immediate popular uprising from taking place, it would be baptized as a "bold initiative" and a serious effort at "starting a new phase that puts the derailed democratic process back on track" and "a new beginning" in the political life of the country that "ushers in a new era" where "free and fair elections" would be promised. To give it credibility and gain acceptability, "trust building" measures, like releasing a number of political prisoners and allowing opposition party offices to reopen, easing and lifting certain restrictions, etc., would be taken by the regime. A new protocol, in line and consistent with the so called "Code of Conduct" could even be signed anew to that effect. These and a lot more measures would be discussed to "widen" the shrunk and closed political space.

By so doing those opposition parties in question would not only be deluding themselves for a false sense of "political relevance" in the guise of "negotiating new reforms", but would allow themselves to be accessory to a scheme that is designed and aimed at defusing popular movement and prolonging the life of the regime; thus dampening the desire of millions of Ethiopians to get rid of the system altogether. Those organizations would be allowing themselves to be party to and willing participants in the continuation of the misery of the Ethiopian people. They should know that, in the eyes of the Ethiopian people, this would be the last move they would take that would definitively cause them to lose whatever moral bearing they have left. My hope is that those seasoned individuals in many of the organizations would do their utmost, as the Medrek group did vis-à-vis the so called Code of Conduct, to remain vigilant and firm.

The external aspect of it would come from groups based and operating mainly from outside the country that are bent on working with known anti-Ethiopian and secessionist forces and anti-Ethiopian governments like Sheabia of Eritrea. No one would question the commitment to the struggle and the patriotism of most of them. However, in their earnest desire to see the regime go – which everyone of us agrees with – their close collaboration with known and avowed anti-Ethiopian groups would cause further fissure among the opposition and disheartens Ethiopians. Ironically, in an effort to inculcate doubt and suspicion in people's minds and undermine the opposition, the regime would exploit it to the maximum by singling out and highlighting the issue to implicate not only those organizations but also the entire opposition.

Such acts will continue to be divisive and would hamper any effort at reorganizing a tangible and reformulated national opposition; thus becoming an obstruction to a critically important solidly unified opposition that could and should play a vital role in any possible popular uprising, especially in its wake.

On the other hand, such impetuous measures would only serve to revive dying and irrelevant anti-unity forces. As I stated repeatedly, I have no problem with individuals in those groups and do not hate them. How can I hate myself? They are my Ethiopian brothers and sisters. My problem is with what they stand for; **their organizing principle that clearly declares war on Ethiopia and Ethiopiness**. As an Ethiopian, I have an equal right and the solemn obligation to fight for the human and political rights of all Ethiopians that includes the people these groups claim are exclusively theirs. That is what all Ethiopian national (multi-ethnic) organizations stand for. The reason TPLF waged vicious war against EPRP and EDU was not because these organizations were anti-T'rai or they did not stand for the people T'grai. For a long time, these organizations had more Ethiopians of T'grian origin in them (from top leadership down) than TPLF could muster to mobilize. The focus now should be on what unites us and our unity as a people and country, and not on divisiveness. Call me whatever you want, but frankly speaking, any collaboration or alignment with known and avowed anti-unity and secessionist forces would amount to fighting their fight for their cause. Lack of unity among unity forces is already a disgrace. But actively allying with forces that declared war on Ethiopia and Ethiopianess is despicably disgraceful. Engaging or not engaging such forces could come only after democratic and unity forces come together and forge a common national platform on a national agenda. What

is on the table is not a sectarian fight, but a fight of and for all Ethiopians. That is why I believe that this act of literally giving oxygen to asphyxiated groups is short sighted and makes any talk of the country's unity or condemnation of the divisive ethnocentric and anti-Ethiopian policies of Meles Zenawi empty rhetoric and delusional.

The crux of the matter is that the Ethiopian people and democrats and unity forces DO NOT need any direct or indirect help from anti-unity and secessionist sectors to do away with the main divisive force - the Meles regime. This is no ordinary time to take chances with the fate of the nation. If such Ethiopian groups truly believe in the mighty power of the people, embracing secessionist armed groups, particularly at this time and at this historic juncture where Ethiopians may once again have a formidable chance to rise up in unison - like they did in May 2005 - and reject not only the regime but the whole idea of ethnic or religion-based division to chart their collective future is incomprehensible and highly irresponsible. As May of 2005 unequivocally proved, unity of the people that transcends ethnicity and religion - like what any unified popular uprising should be - is a blow not only to the regime but also to all groups that espouse the same ethnocentric political philosophy and have the same organizing principles. One of the beauties of May, 2005 was that it was a referendum that passed a death sentence on divisive ethnic politics and sectarianism. Sadly, as we know, some among the opposition, in effect, reversed that glorious victory of our people with their decision to embrace the so called AFD. Why some elements give undue importance to these groups and undermine the power of the people and unity itself is beyond me. The resolve Ethiopians have to do away with ethnocentricity that they have endured for twenty years under Meles cannot and should not falter or show weakness on others who stand for the same principles or even worse. No double standards. That is called principle, no ifs or buts. (I have detailed my reasons as to why that is in the "What Next?" series).

Some compatriots may argue that engaging those groups is beneficial not only to topple the regime of Meles Zenawi, but also for "transitioning to democracy". But I have these simple questions for them: Were not, for example, ONLF and OLF members of the TPLF-led "Transitional Government"? What exactly was the reason for their difference with the ruling party that led them to resume armed struggle and for what purpose? Did any of the reasons have to do with democracy? Moreover and more importantly, talking of these groups' "important" role in future "transition", would any Ethiopian group worth the name be willing and ready to 'give' or yield to these or other similar groups more than what they got from TPLF/EPRDF? Or why would one expect them to settle for less?

We need to have a bifocal view of the whole spectrum of possible repercussions and the different aspects and dimensions of what a popular uprising in present day Ethiopia could entail. It is incumbent upon all democratic unity forces and Ethiopian patriots to closely examine the entire range of consequences of our actions. What should be clear is that, because of the factors on the ground I detailed earlier, such an environment would be a boon to those elements as it creates an opportune moment and gives them a formidable chance to get an assured foothold in their "respective" areas. No wonder that these elements, that never cared to positively respond to any and all calls from democratic and unity forces for the causes of democracy and human rights of all Ethiopians are now eager to "collaborate" with some Ethiopian groups. In addition to their stated objectives of secession, what we see in their publications and official pronouncements to date do not assuage the fear and suspicion most Ethiopians have that these groups would refrain from embarking on the evil act of ethnic-cleansing if and when they get a chance to have the upper hand in what they consider to be "their areas".

The stakes for Ethiopia and Ethiopians are high, and as Ethiopians, the least we could do is not to be accessory to acts of possible ethnic-cleansing and the dismemberment of our country. As I said before, we cannot poke our eye with a bayonet (dagger) just to remove an irritant particle

The second challenge to a successful unified popular uprising would come from 'Third Parties'. These are foreign powers, mainly referred to as 'donor' countries. The memory of the

notorious "London Conference" that transferred Ethiopian political power to TPLF and EPLF and decided the fate of the country without the consent of the people is still afresh in the minds of Ethiopians. Ethiopians, therefore, see foreign involvement in their political life with utmost suspicion.

These forces have two blocks. The Chinese block that seems to be busy propping despots everywhere, but especially in Africa, by lending financial and technical assistances and political support, giving war making machines and especially weapons of suppression and means of muzzling dissent; from jamming equipments to disrupting social media, etc.

The 'democratic' block led by US, UK, Germany and France assist the regime of Meles Zenawi both financially and politically for political reasons that have to do with regional stability and to a lesser extent aimed at competing with and lessening the ever-growing and aggressive Chinese influence in the region and Africa in general. Ethiopia being strategically located in a highly volatile and dangerous neighborhood has a quintessential and indispensable stabilizing role to play particularly at this time. Regional stability is the underpinning for their primary concern and seems to preoccupy these powers. They understand the tense and fractured nature of the internal and regional situations Ethiopia finds itself in.

Their approach to Ethiopia, in view of the unfolding popular uprisings in the region, seems to be aimed at somehow temporizing the momentum and "calming" the situation and making sure 'things do not get out of hand'. For that, their primary choice, as was evidenced in their reactions in Egypt and elsewhere, would be aimed at first somehow salvaging the regime, then 'encouraging' the regime's leaders to introduce "necessary" reforms, relax restrictive laws and open dialogue with the opposition; in that order, and they only come out in support of the revolutionaries almost at the very end.

These powers may already have begun to be engaged in an earnest but futile attempt to urge Mr. Meles and his regime to constructively engage the opposition. Concurrently, they might be working with certain groups and elements in the opposition to open dialogue with the regime. And Meles knows their moves and understands their modus operandi, and counts on their "assistance" to rescue him once again, like they did in September of 2006 or prior to the 2010 elections, to influence and convince opposition groups to get into a dialogue with his regime; possibly and for him preferably a protracted one.

If tension intensifies further, however, and if these powers continue to sense how severe the situation is and clearly understand the need for drastic change, at least symbolically, I would not doubt nor would I be surprised if they work behind the scenes at replacing Meles himself with someone who, most importantly can be acceptable to and can exert control of the Armed and Security Forces. The stakes are so high that, especially in the absence of a known and credible national alternative, they would do everything to avoid an unpredictable popular uprising with a dreadful potential for a vacuum. Because of the high degree of risks any loss of central authority entails, their focus would also be tilted toward shoring up the Armed Forces to assume a more "responsible" role. The last thing the region, especially Ethiopia, needs is unruliness and chaos. Under the circumstances, everyone knows that any descent to chaos in Ethiopia would be catastrophic. That would give these powers pose and would prompt them to play an active role, not necessarily for Ethiopia's sake but theirs. There is, of course a real possibility that they could be manipulated and used by the sharp-tongued Meles to save his tenure for as long as he could; thus, whether they intend it or not, becoming an obstacle to real change the Ethiopian people need. Nonetheless, it would be wise for Ethiopians to reserve judgment, keep their vigilance and make a concerted effort to make proper use of it. Ethiopians should not afford to fail to do that.

Needless to say that, situations in Ethiopia do demand and warrant more fundamental change and the people currently in power are incapable of ushering in required reforms. Cosmetic changes do not satisfy the needs and desires of the population and would amount to nothing except probably delaying the inevitable but also further complicating the situation in the process. But, whatever these powers are bent on doing, they should know that their efforts would be

counterproductive and futile if they are done half heartedly and timidly and are aimed at only saving the regime rather than using their good offices to positively influence the situation that would give Ethiopians a chance to chart a new beginning. What is expected of them and what Ethiopian want from them is to play a positive role by putting due pressure on the ruthless rulers and refraining from directly or indirectly and under any pretext aiding and abating any secessionist groups, satisfactorily contributing toward democratizing society, assisting in every way possible so that Ethiopia continues to maintain its unity. That is the right way to regional stability.

The third and more important challenge for the sustenance and success of a popular uprising in Ethiopia is the absence of both a unified and unifying countrywide organization and structure. There also is lack of demonstrable clarity on national objectives and unity of purpose from the Democratic and Unity Forces perspective. Some may suggest that 'getting rid of the tyrannical regime of Meles' to be a unifying cause that is sufficient enough to be embraced by all sectors of society in every 'region' and galvanize the population. That fine line, however, is where political objectives of political forces deviate.

There is no doubt that Ethiopians in every region could mount a successive popular uprising against the Meles regime. But the question is that, in view of the lamentable absence of credible unifying and united national organizations and institutions coupled with the overall uneasy group relations as a direct result of the divisive policies that the regime has so systematically instituted and continues to count on to fragment unified action, and the prevalence of groups that are readily available and eager to widen any cracks, what mechanisms and institutional guarantees are there to make it a sustainable **national movement** the goal of which goes beyond the toppling of the regime?

Unity for unity's sake that has a limited objective of toppling the regime is not only insufficient but ill-advised. For Ethiopian Democrats Unity Forces (EDUF) and patriots, that is a vague, very shallow and may only serve as a short-term slogan. The question is not that anyone among the Democratic Unity Forces would have any problem with 'getting rid of the Meles regime'. This is only an immediate and **transitive** objective to our collective journey toward a united Ethiopia with a democratic constitutional order. How many among the 'opposition' agree with that ultimate goal, I call the end game? The struggle is to get rid of the Meles regime along with its system of divisive ethnocentric policies and political philosophy, and aimed at attaining the ultimate and inseparable objectives of justice and equality of all citizens and the unity of the country. There are groups whose aims and objectives fall far short of that comprehensive goal and only boil down to the removal of the regime without any serious thought and consideration to what should come next. The concern of the Democratic Unity Forces and patriotic Ethiopians is in satisfactorily and clearly answering the 'What Next' aspect right now, not afterwards. And that should be the basis for any collaboration or alliance among and between organizations.

Unlike us, Ethiopians, who have the misfortune of being under a divisive system that made dividing people on ethnic lines and destroying our societal fabric that bound us together its main mission, in Tunisia, Egypt and the rest of the countries where popular uprisings are succeeding, the people have unity of purpose and common goals, they are not divided on ethnic lines and have good societal relations, and despite decades-long ruthless dictatorships, they had the primordial and most critical elements for a harmonious, continuous and integrated society crystallized in a sense of oneness and pride in being part of a united country and never doubting or questioning their unity and that of their country's. Moreover, they have national institutions they proudly consider theirs, like the armed forces, and countrywide unions. The absence of civic society, countrywide unions and institutions and lack of a credible unified and unifying national organization would be the other major hurdle that we Ethiopians face to mounting a sustainable and successive popular uprising.

*Next in Part IV, "What Could Be Done To Overcome The Hurdles", and Conclusion.*