

Tigrean Nationalism: From Revolutionary Force to Weapon of Repression

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Browse through any Ethiopian websites, and you will discover that almost every article or commentary says something about the Tigrean domination of the country. The cyber world is crammed with statistics, testimonies, conspiracy theories and condemnations. Some of the fervent cases brought forth include;

- How Tigray disproportionately benefits under this regime,
- How 95% of all important military and security posts have been occupied by ethnic Tigreans,
- Reports over the TPLF-owned giant conglomerate known by its acronym, EFFORT
- Accounts of how the Tigrean-only Agazi commando force has been used to commit heinous crimes,
- The meteoric rise of Tigrean elites into the club of world millionaires,
- And denunciations of the unacceptable monopolization of the church and mosque leadership by rebels-turned-men-of-God.

Most of these allegations are true, while some are perhaps exaggerated. However, there is no doubt that they are indicative of the growing rift between Tigrean elites, who deny or defend their hegemonic and exclusive economic advantage, and their adversaries, who offer evidence after evidence to back up their complaints. I have been a keen observer of how the system actually functions under the shadow of the current regime. As I read arguments and analyses provided by different individuals and groups, I find a lack of revealing analysis of the true purpose behind the blatantly pro-Tigrean policies of the current regime. Therefore, in this article I will analyze the strategies, tactics and politics behind the transformation of the TPLF from a peasant revolutionary force into Africa's richest oligarchy.

First encounter with a Tigrean Nationalist

My initial encounter with a Tigrean nationalist took place sometime in the mid-'90s, at a time when the fight between TPLF and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was at its peak. A discussion between an older neighbor and a TPLF soldier called Manjus caught my attention. Manjus was passionately talking about how he joined TPLF. His story begins about ten years earlier, when the young Tigrean and his sister were attending high school in a town far away from their village. One day, they returned home for a mid-semester vacation and found their village virtually burned to the ground. The two students came home to discover a completely demolished house, dead parents and whatever property the peasant family owned gone. In a tragic incident, the two siblings lost everything. They had no hope, no family or means of support that could help them go back to school. To make matters worse, they were told that the Derg cadres were hunting for them. As they tried to cope with the sudden shock, anger, and despair, they were met by TPLF recruiters who came with a promise of a means for revenge towards those who slaughtered their parents and also bring peace, justice and democracy to their oppressed Tigrean people. The helpless mourners and enraged youngsters could not resist the offer, so they joined the freedom

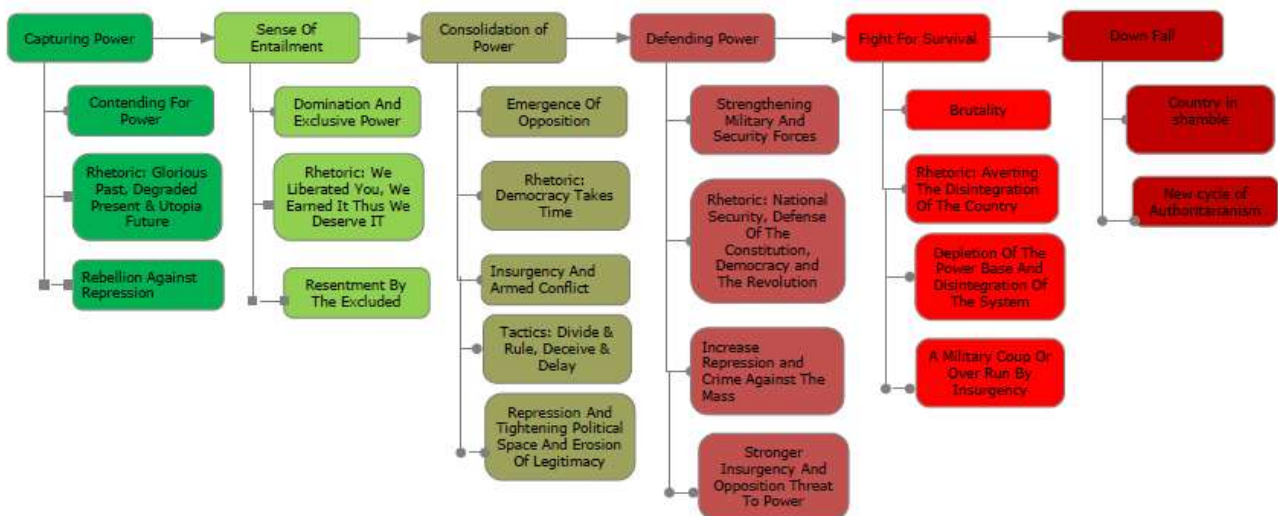
fighters. A few years later, Manjus lost his sister to the war shortly before TPLF controlled Finfinne. Soon things turned upside down. When Meles replaced Mengistu, Manjus' turn came to chase another rebel group and burn down many other villages, including mine.

I was a young boy back then. But it still baffles me why someone who picked up arms against an oppressive regime because his village was burned would come to destroy mine or someone who joined freedom fighters to free his people would suppress my people. It remains a question for which I still seek an answer. During my high school years, I read the history of TPLF in newspapers and magazines, listened to the radio and watched television during the *Yekatit 11th* and *Ginbot 20th* celebrations, when TPLF leaders would talk for days about the cause for which they had waged a fierce struggle, the hardships they went through and the glory of defeating the “murderous” enemy. As a young Oromo nationalist with grievances against the dominant culture, I understood why they rebelled against oppressive system. But none of their explanations ever answered my question as to why those freedom fighters turned into ruthless oppressors within such a short period of time.

As I grew older, the list of my questions has also grown. The Tigrean people suffered economic alienation under Haile Selassie and were subjected to ruthless suppression and persecution under the Derg regime. It was their grievances that gave birth to TPLF, and Tigreans supported and sustained the front through years of bloody struggle for their freedom. Then, how could such freedom-loving people remain loyal to a party that oppresses, kills, loots and destroys the lives of other ethnic groups? There is no easy answer to this question but one might begin to understand it by assessing the historic and contemporary relationships between the people of Tigray and the TPLF.

Politics of Entitlement: “I Earned It, so I Deserve It”

A Dictator's Power Line



Rebels follow a common path in the power cycle. Imagine rebelling against repression--- going to the jungle and fighting your way up the ladder of State power and reaching the pinnacle. Then imagine a classmate of yours who did not rebel with you but stayed in school, went abroad to study at some fancy college, got his PhD and returned to the country you liberated. Not only was your friend absent during the grueling years of the struggle, now he talks of democracy, and wants to share the power that you gained through sweat and blood. What a farce, you would think, this is not fair!

What about other organizations that fought in alliance with you against the same regime, but whom you now have to outrun to capture power before they beat you to it? While it's true that they fought with you, you think, they were never effective, and your organization paid the highest price and contributed the most towards bringing down the enemy. Therefore, you deserve the maximum share of the power and that power sharing should be in accordance with contribution. After all, you have the power and you should be the chief decision maker. Other organizations either get whatever you give them or they don't get any power.

This is a common path all rebel-turned-rulers use to rationalize blocking democratization and hold power exclusively. That is exactly what Meles Zenawi did. If we look back, first, organizations and individuals who did not participate in the war or whose political views contradict that of the TPLF were excluded from joining the Transitional Government. Some were labeled outdated or old revolutionaries; others were accused of being associated with the past regime, and many more were pushed away because they refused to organize along ethnic lines.

Those who were allowed to participate in the transitional government but refused to become subordinate to TPLF did not last long. For instance, Meles could not coexist with the OLF, which boasted a larger constituency but had weaker military strength. Literally, there was no difference between the leaders of the two organizations in terms of their alleged objectives, liberation of their respective nations. But Meles felt that it was unacceptable to allow OLF to remain in the coalition. OLF appeared to potentially win in the forthcoming election and take control of power through majority rule.

The sacrifices, hardships and violence involved in waging an armed struggle lead to development of a strong sense of entitlement that becomes a justification for holding exclusive power. In a multinational country such as Ethiopia, with several competing interest groups, holding exclusive power produces multiple enemies for the power-holder. As such, the new rulers have to use any and all means at their disposal to consolidate and defend the hard-earned prize. That is why so many freedom fighters turn into ruthless oppressors even before the blood of their martyrs desiccates. That was why Manjus came to my village.

As shown in the diagram, rebels capture state power after paying heavy sacrifices and immediately begin consolidating power by fending off real and assumed adversaries. Their attempt to hold power exclusively earns them opposition from those grieving for not being able to share a piece of the pie. Soon, the opposition groups start to organize themselves to contend for power which forces the new regime to move into defensive position. The regime uses all forces at its disposal to suppress its emerging opponents and their supporters which radicalize the later and often leading to a violent confrontation. Increased repression and a tight political space

not only delegitimize the system but also broaden and galvanize support for the opposition. When its power is seriously threatened, the regime uses excessive force in an effort to suppress and destroy its adversaries. In the process, it commits heinous crimes against the general population and reaches a point of no return that fighting is not just about holding onto power for its privilege but rather about safety and survival of the rulers.

Part II: Nationalism, Mixed Heritage and Its Consequences

Individuals of mixed heritage – those born to parents of two different ethnic, racial or religious backgrounds – often face an identity crisis due to the difficulty of choosing between either side of their lineage, particularly if the two groups are in conflict. Let there be no confusion that it's a blessing to be born from two different cultures for many different reasons. But in transitional societies, since such individuals are not the “full-blooded” members of any particular group, they are rarely accepted and trusted in either camp – particularly during conflicts and tensions. In an effort to win trust, they may attempt extreme identification with one side and express extreme distaste for the other. Unfortunately, even such efforts rarely help them gain long term acceptance. This seems to be the case with Meles Zenawi. He was born from a Tigrean father and an Eritrean mother. To some extent, these facts seem to have shaped his views, actions and roles within the TPLF movement and in Ethiopian politics.

Ethno-nationalism, perhaps helpful as a mobilizing force, has major deficiencies due to its over-emphasis on bloodlines and ethnic purity as a measurement of membership, loyalty and level of nationalism. Close reading of some literature written by Meles' opponents indicate that behind his back his loyalty was closely scrutinized, from the very beginning, due to his mixed heritage. To overcome this challenge, he adopted the extreme form of Tigrean nationalism, as shown with his fervent support for independence during the early stage of the movement. Even during the early years of his rein in Finfinne, when the legitimacy of his power was challenged by the “full-blooded” Tigrean nationalists, he repeatedly emphasized the greatness and uniqueness of the Tigreans, as evidenced with his expression of Tigreans as a “golden” people. Such tactics were aimed at boosting his nationalistic credentials within the party's rank and file.

The Ethio-Eritrean war seems to have intensified Meles' identity crisis. As a leader of Ethiopia, he had to defend his power and the country's sovereignty against an attack by his maternal relatives. His adversarial faction made his identity a major issue, and publicly questioned his loyalty both to Tigray and Ethiopia. The EPLF, which earlier thought that it was installing a friendly regime in Finfinne, felt betrayed by Meles' willingness to succumb to Tigreans' pressure and refused to submit to Asmara's demand.

The identity crisis he faced at every political turn seems to have desensitized Meles making him a rationally calculative individual. He came to terms with the fact that he can fit neither into Tigrean nor to Eritrean or even Ethiopian nationalist camps. Contrary to popular belief, he is neither a Tigrean nationalist as he claims, nor is he the undercover Eritrean nationalist as charged by his opponents. Knowing that neither of the two groups can trust him and provide him a long term and sustainable support, Meles does not rely on or trust any of them. Thus, we see him

constantly shifting his loyalty and priorities between the two groups to advance his personal interests.

His own experiences as a person of mixed heritage involved in nationalist or identity-based struggles have helped him to clearly understand the difficulties and opportunities of mixed people. Thus, it is not without reason that he surrounds himself with such individuals. Many of his loyal surrogates are those of mixed heritage with bitter experiences of identity crisis. In fact, from those at the top of the ruling oligarchy to those at the bottom of the food chain, the system is filled with individuals whose identity, character and loyalty has been questioned by “true” nationalists. These individuals understand that, even if one side of their lineage takes power in the ongoing power struggle, they will always be ostracized and sidelined by the “full-blooded” nationalists. Therefore it is in their best interest to support and safeguard Meles' rule. In short, unlike nationalists who are subjected to “group” loyalty, those of mixed heritage within the system act in their own self-interest.

Thus, it's a mistake to assume that ethno-nationalism guides Meles' actions and decisions. True nationalists tend to be passionate and emotionally attached to the “cause”, which clouds their rational judgment. They often fail to differentiate between rhetoric and interest. What we see with Meles is a man who is cold-blooded, calculative, and one with a façade of rationality who uses nationalism and ideology to advance his personal interest and dumps it when it gets in his way. For instance, he is accused of agitating Eritrea's independence because his mother was Eritrean. In my view, he did so simply to eliminate a powerful contender, EPLF, from competing against him in Finfinne. If he really cared about Eritreans, he would not have committed a crime against humanity by kicking out thousands of Eritreans, snatching them from the land they were born and raised, simply to save his power. He had the means and the ability to prevent this, but he executed the decisions happily and without reservation, even justifying his actions by saying “we are entitled to deport anyone even for disliking the color of their eyes.” His current move to allow Eritreans to return and reclaim their property should also be seen as a strategic preparation for a possible shift of alliances. He is attempting to create a new political base by forging a coalition of Tigrean and Eritrean economic elites in order to counter his Eritrean and Tigrean political adversaries each of who are attempting cornering him through alliances with elites of other ethnic groups.

Attributing Meles' policy of disproportionately benefiting the Tigrean elites to narrow nationalism, therefore, is a mistake. A careful review of his track record also negates this belief. For one, he has eliminated most of the “true” Tigrean nationalists. In fact, the strongest nationalist wing of the TPLF has been effectively forced out at different stages. This group was gradually weakened by dividing them across regional (awurajja) lines, depleting their support and popularity, and eventual purging or outright physical elimination of the leading figures one after another. Therefore, the *Tigrean People* Liberation Front has ceased to exist in its truest sense and has been replaced by a powerful, tightly organized business oligarchy made up of individuals acting in self-interest. The nationalist rhetoric and ethno-centric policies are simply smoke screen tactics to divert attention and maintain the political support of the Tigrean people.

Narrow Nationalism or an Effective Business Oligarchy

Ever since the TPLF came to power, there has been a greater attempt to economically develop the Tigray region before the rest of the country. It is a common belief that the economic, bureaucratic, security and religious institutions of the central government hierarchy have been monopolized by Tigrean elites. Although there is insufficient statistical data available to show the extent of the disparity, the domination of the central government's agencies, institutions and the economic sector by Tigrean elites is an undeniable fact. However, by dwelling on these disparities, I believe critics of the regime have missed one critical point. Why do Meles Zenawi and his oligarchy promote such a blatant and *visible* favoritism towards the Tigray region and Tigrean elites?

One popular theory is that the leadership is so ethnocentric that they prioritize their kin and home region at the expense of others. Another theory alleges that Tigreans, as a minority group, believe that they cannot hold on to exclusive power forever. Hence, they are building a strong economic foundation to position themselves against their adversaries – either to use their economic power to influence any regime that will replace them - or if things get worse, to establish a self sufficient, regional super power, an independent Tigrean state. These two theories cannot be discounted, given the fact that Tigrean elites, despite controlling central power, refuse to integrate themselves into the larger population and often warn about the possibility of breaking the country apart.

In my view, Meles Zenawi and his top confidants are in it for themselves, and it is all about protecting their personal power and economic interest. To me, TPLF has long become a business oligarchy serving and protecting the interest of Meles and a few individuals around him. The oligarchy has been using the Tigrean people to insulate themselves against their opponents. Thus, disproportionately favoring the Tigray region is a calculated move not only to increase Meles' nationalist credentials, but also to agitate the rest of the Ethiopian people, and create a sense of insecurity among the Tigreans so that they remain loyal supporters of the regime. Similarly, Tigrean elites have been made to monopolize the center in order to propagate tension and hostility from the elites of other ethnic groups. As a result, in order to retain their economic privilege, power and sense of security, the Tigrean elites have to defend the regime at any cost.

The Strategy: Isolate, Scare and Secure the Support Base

Meles Zenawi and his oligarchy have been able to effectively execute these plans so far for the following reasons. One, as a leading member of the group that articulated Tigrean nationalism and transformed it into revolutionary force, he was aware that maintaining the loyalty of the Tigrean base after the fall of Derg required the presence of permanent and imminent threat to their livelihood. Two, the oligarchy realized that in addition to the historic Amhara-Tigrean power struggle, when such a small minority group dominates the polity, it would be unacceptable to the majority. Thus, any opposition would have to take such monopolization of the state by minority as a major issue and propagate anti-Tigrean rhetoric – which scares Tigreans and keeps them loyal to the ruling party even if they disagree with some policies of the regime.

To increase the nationalistic aspect of the rebellion, the TPLF used effective propaganda that focused on emphasizing the glorious history of Tigray from Axum onward, recreating the memory of the glorious past to create a sense of pride. The discrimination and humiliation faced by Tigreans under the Amhara domination also served to create anger against the Amhara led central government. However, once the TPLF took power, there was no longer a central government to oppress the Tigray peasants. Therefore, the front had to facilitate conditions that could help maintain the loyalty of the Tigrean people. This came in two phases. The first was favoring the region economically and popularizing this favoritism. This served two purposes. One, it made the Tigrean peasants believe that they were reaping the fruits of their sweat. Two, it helped create jealousy and furor among other Ethiopians which created an anti-Tigrean sentiment. The goal of this first phase was to isolate the Tigrean peasants and create permanent fear so that they would remain loyal to the regime for protection. Once isolation and continuous loyalty of the Tigrean peasant was secured, the second phase was domination of all institutions (administrative, security, economic, and religious) by loyal Tigrean elites. This was done to fuel resentment among the elites of other ethnic groups. Gradually, the power and privilege of Tigrean elites became dependent upon supporting and maintaining the regime by being loyal defenders of the oligarchy.

TPLF's excessive favoritism of the Tigray region is systematically "exposed" to the opposition and to the general public. TPLF's own homemade satellite parties (PDOs) were created to debate and defend the disproportional growth of the Tigray region. Public debate was deliberately orchestrated to expose the level of disparity to the rest of the country in an effort to make the issue a major topic of discussion amongst the general public. In other words, the ruling party was framing the agenda for the opposition. Therefore, during the early years of Meles Zenawi's reign, the opposition was obsessed with the rapid "*Europeanization*" of Tigray. Newspapers and politicians of all stripes cried the slogan of "*Tigray sitlema lelaw ager yidma*" – let Tigray prosper while others bleed. At the same time, the regime assured Tigreans that they were harvesting the fruit of their struggle. Those in the opposition, the Tigreans were told, are Tigre-haters who want to use excuses to bring back the old regime. Geographically isolated, facing accusation and threat from the opposition, provided comfort and assurance by their party, the people of Tigray had to remain loyal to their *vanguard*.

The Tactics

Once the collective loyalty of the Tigray peasant was secured, the regime intensified its effort to grab the unconditional loyalty of the Tigrean elites who reside outside the region, all over Ethiopia and in the Diaspora. These elites were offered power and privilege over their counterparts, and the latter began to show resentment against this discrimination. For Tigrean elites, suppressing such dissent became a matter of protecting their own privilege. While acting on their own self interest, they indirectly defend the regime.

The issue of the military being exclusively commanded by Tigreans at every level is an excellent example. Military coup is one of the worst nightmares of authoritarians. Appointing Tigreans at every level of the command structure ensures the presence of permanent tension within the military. Since any coup by dissenting officers requires coordination, the atmosphere of tension at every level of the structure makes it more difficult to conspire.

In a similar fashion, Tigrean students in universities across the country have been separately organized. The regime fears that if Tigrean students are allowed to integrate into the larger student body, they would learn about the injustices, crimes and repressions committed against other ethnic groups, and they might expose the regime when they return home to Tigray. To prevent such integration, Tigrean students are provided perceived or real favoritism in the form of allowances, better job offers upon graduation and so on. This infuriates students from other ethnic groups, as evidenced by periodic conflict between Tigrean and Amhara, or Tigrean and Oromo students. It is even rumored that the Tigrean students have been armed all across campuses to defend themselves against “haters”. The rage by other ethnic groups against Tigrean students makes the latter so insecure that they support the regime at any cost even if they disagree with its policies. They become blinded to the crimes of the oligarchy and are often dismissive of even obvious issues they witness.

Unlike the peasants in Tigray, Tigreans in Finfinne and other towns are more integrated into the mainstream society and did not directly experience the brutality of the Derg’s campaign against TPLF. Therefore, they did not have such a strong bonding to TPLF, which makes it harder to isolate them from the rest of Ethiopians and insure their loyalty to the regime. Creating their insecurity requires facilitating a direct threat to their own interest and lives. To that end, their economic advantage under this regime has to be so visible as to create rage amongst their neighbors. Tigreans who showed loyalty were provided with easy credit, low interest rate loans, and etc. so that they could ascend the economic ladder very quickly. This was successful in producing suspicion and jealousy among their non-Tigrean colleagues, friends and neighbors who began accusing them of ripping unfair benefits by virtue of their ethnicity.

Appointing a Tigrean as a patriarch of the Orthodox Church was another effective move aimed at weakening the religious bond between Tigreans and non-Tigrean Orthodox Christians. From the early days of the struggle, TPLF has made relentless effort to break the religious bond Tigreans have with the Amhara through the institution of the church. This culminated in the removal of the former patriarch and replacing him by a Tigrean loyal to the oligarchy. The intensified effort to make ethnicity more important than religious solidarity has resulted in ever increasing tension within the institution and among the followers, and official split is prevented only because the incumbent patriarch is backed by the state.

Therefore, by openly favoring Tigreans and agitating the rest of the country, a condition of fear and insecurity has been created.

Part III: Why do Tigreans Continue to Support the Oligarchy?

Why do most Tigreans remain loyal to a brutal dictator and a corrupt oligarchy? To answer this question we need to investigate how their nationalism has been utilized by the oligarchy to secure political power.

a) Psychological Attachment

Ethno-nationalist struggles have strong emotional and psychological rhetoric designed to draw the populace into the cause. This nature of ethnic nationalism has a positive mobilizing role

during the struggle against gross injustices and discriminations. But it can also create an undesirable mental blockage that prevents the populace and activists from focusing on the greater prize of achieving long term justice, prosperity and stability. It may even create a "zombism" effect when the population is exploited by their own authoritarian leaders. Due to their passionate and emotional attachment to the "cause", when the polarizing and self-serving policy of their leadership and organization is criticized, they become so defensive that they turn a blind eye to the injustice and corruptions committed by their leaders.

By contrast, in an attempt to discredit ethnic-based movements, "centralist" scholars and opposition figures often undermine the powerful role ethnic nationalism plays in organizing and mobilizing people. They fail to understand that such nationalists have unusually strong emotional and psychological attachment to the cause they advocate and that they are ready to sacrifice everything to realize it. Therefore, while trying to contain ethnic movements, by belittling the cause of ethnic nationalists, centralists often push the nationalists to the extreme, and strengthen their determination.

One can clearly detect such emotional bonding between the Tigrean people and the TPLF. Because the organization was heavily dependent on the populace during the struggle, it was able to establish an extended and deeply penetrating network in Tigray. As a result, TPLF's activities affected a vast majority of the peasantry forcing the Derg to inflict heavy collateral damage. The collective punishment by the government, when added to the rebels' propaganda, facilitated the condition for Tigreans to strongly identify with TPLF. Hence, an attack on or criticism of the TPLF has been deeply felt by the larger populace. In Ethiopian politics, where sweeping generalization is the accepted norm, opponents of TPLF often throw insensitive accusation and insults that deeply offend Tigrean nationalists. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear people accusing the TPLF as an enemy of Ethiopia. For ordinary Tigrean fighters and the general public, the war was never about destroying other people's life, but about restoring their own normative conditions. A Tigrean mother who lost a son and a former fighter who was disabled during the liberation war can hardly understand why their sacrifices should be blamed for destruction of Ethiopia. Any accusation that belittles their sacrifices is highly offensive and is considered a personal attack on their martyrs.

b) Naming and Shaming

The other tactics used by the oligarchy against Tigreans who did not fall for the isolation trap is naming and shaming them as sellouts, traitors of the cause and the martyrs, friends of the enemy etc. These tactics are used particularly against the Tigrean Diaspora. Progressive individuals who oppose the regime's ethno-racist policies and work with the opposition are singled out for smear campaigns designed to isolate them from the community. These kind of tactics have severe social cost to the victim's daily lives in the Diaspora and to their loved ones back in the country. Given the fact that TPLF is such a wealthy and highly organized party with a very small support base, it has been easy to monitor and control the population of the Tigray state. As such, when a person refuses to cooperate with the regime's Diaspora associates, his family can be easily identified and targeted – including harassment, denial of social service -- in order to exert pressure on him. Fearing these often severe consequences, only a small portion of Tigrean dissidents dare to publicly criticize the regime.

c) Tigrean Elites Interest driven Rationalization and its Irrationality

For Tigrean elites who are loyal to the regime, there are several rationalizations which define their need to continue support for the regime. First, as previously discussed, is the fear that their people are under threat and need the regime's protection. Second, they assume that the regime is too strong and the opposition is so divided across ethnic and ideological lines that a regime change is not in sight. According to their estimate, since this regime will be in power for the next several decades, it will be possible to build a strong and sustainable Tigrean economic power. Towards this end, "revolutionary democracy" will be used to amass resources and to establish a liberal democracy that protects the capitalists and will be under their influence. Third, if in the unlikely case of violent insurrection that forces the regime from power, there will be an economic and military superpower state, Tigray, that will defend itself against any aggression from the South. All these assumptions seem sound at first, but upon further examination they are shown to be unrealistic.

i. The First count of Irrationality: Undefeatable Regime

There is no doubt that the Ethiopian military is among the strongest and most capable in Africa. But this strength is limited only to defending the country against foreign aggression. As far as internal threats are concerned, we need to understand that Ethiopia has the most ethnically-divided and fragmented military in its history. Haile Selassie's military was made up of career soldiers who were recruited by foreign advisors from amongst highly-qualified students. As the wound of the Italian aggression was new and the Somalis posed a real threat, the military was full of nationalism. The Derg was able to fight seventeen years because the military was united behind the idea of protecting the country's unity. Although ethnic prejudices did exist, identity-based discrimination within the military was rare, as many of the commanders themselves came from economically and socially marginalized south.

Today's Ethiopian military is different. From the beginning, the army was made up of soldiers contributed by multiple ethnic liberation movements. From the start; these soldiers were highly motivated by ethnic nationalism and believed that they were joining the federal military to represent their ethnic group. Unfortunately, when they came to the federal military they were subjected to domination by TPLF soldiers and the policies that promote Tigrean supremacy. This was a contradiction; the fact that soldiers recruited through ethnic nationalism were subjected to purely ethnic discrimination prevents cohesion. Although the Eritrean invasion brought some unity, it was short lived, as the regime intensified the malicious policy of segregating the soldiers across ethnic lines. Tigrean officers were favored with better housing, different health care services and even better quality uniforms. As the resentment increased the situation was further exacerbated by regular purging, killing and imprisonment of dissenting soldiers.

Today, the military is on the verge of implosion. In the past three years alone, there have been numerous unreported mutinies, and the regime has purged or grounded all Oromo and Amhara high ranking officers. This was done to prevent the possibility of a coup, but by doing so, the ruling clique has further increased anti-Tigrean sentiment within the military, creating favorable conditions for armed insurrection. Today if an insurgency can mount a sustainable attack for a few months, there would be an exodus of defection from the Ethiopian military and an increased

threat of internal sabotage. Although the preemptive measures have prevented an organized coup so far, the tense situation could lead to unpredictable chaos that could be destructive not only to the regime but also to the country as a whole. Simply speaking, the current Ethiopian military is unreliable and cannot protect the ruling clique indefinitely.

The security apparatus, which suffers the same ethnic tension as the military, faces different problems. To increase their loyalty, the regime allows security personnel (the Dehnet) unprecedented access to resources and personal wealth. They are allowed to use intimidation to extort money from individuals. Selling land, arranging contraband trading and using allegation to terrorize and extort money has been the primary duty of security officers. A security officer whose priority is amassing wealth has little time and interest to gather accurate information. He will simply invent facts and scenarios and feed it to his boss. We witnessed this during the last election, where imaginary intelligence kept the Prime Minister blind about the level of public discontent against the ruling party. Such corrupted security apparatus is also liable to be converted if there is a party that is willing to pay more.

Thus given these realities of the military and security, it can be argued that the regime's strength is quite shaky and that makes it vulnerable to a sudden collapse. Those who bank on the eternity of the regime in order to justify their role in the criminal acts of the system need to carefully assess their conclusions.

ii. Second Count of Irrationality: From Robbery to Free Market

Absurdly enough, the oligarchy had convinced some people to believe that revolutionary democracy – freedom and free market for the selected few – can be used to amass resources, and build a strong Tigrean middle class that will eventually have the necessary economic muscle in order to protect and advance their long-term interests. Accordingly, after the Tigrean economy is efficiently built, the system will be gradually opened up, liberal democracy will be established and the current rulers will relinquish power to an elected government. By then, not only will liberal democracy protect private property, but also the Tigreans will control major economic sectors. It will then be practically impossible for a new regime to take action against them without facing major economic crisis.

The TPLF regime often cites South Africa's transition from Apartheid to democracy. They proclaim that although political power shifted from whites to blacks, the African National Congress (ANC) leaders could not redistribute wealth due to fear of capital flight. That is, if treated with nationalization, whites would take their money outside the country and lead to financial crisis. Proponents of this argument felt vindicated when Mugabe took action against white Zimbabwean farmers, an action many say was the cause for the financial crisis the country faced afterwards. Hence, once revolutionary democracy creates wealthy Tigreans, they will be in a position to dictate the nature and actions of the new regime.

This theory has two critical problems. First, it assumes that there will be enough time and stability for Tigreans to amass enough wealth that can sustain their influence even after their political rein ends. It will take at least five decades before that level of economic power can be achieved and it is irrational to think that, in a country where ethnic Tigreans make up only 6%,

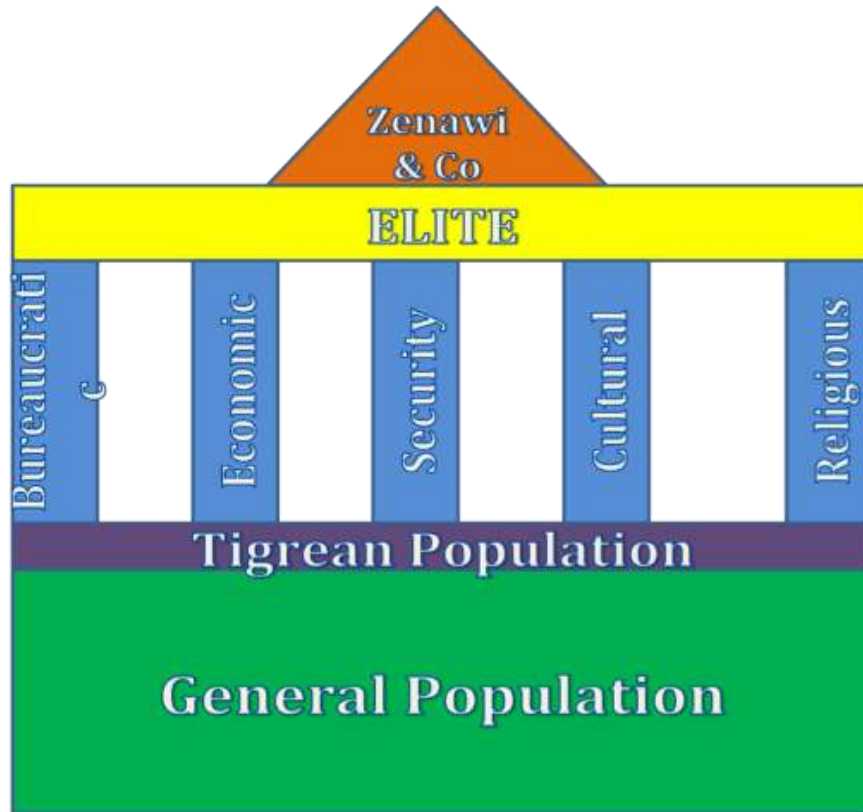
the rest of the country will remain subordinate to such exploitive system. Secondly, unfortunately, Ethiopia is not South Africa or Zimbabwe, nor are Tigreans white European settlers. Therefore, they cannot blackmail a new regime with a threat of capital flight as they have no other home than Ethiopia where they can repatriate to. Nor do they have a support of big-brothers like Britain that will influence the internal and international actors on their behalf to protect the interest of its descendants.

The point here is not that there won't be economic disparity between Tigreans and others. The argument is that such disparity cannot be sustained by the so called "revolutionary" democracy formula. It is simply creating a few Tigrean billionaires sitting on the top of the pyramid, a few hundred Tigrean elite millionaires serving as pillars of power, and millions of Tigrean peasants who are getting a tiny fraction out of the plunder but all staying on the line of defense to sustain the pyramid. The consequence will obviously affect each section but in a reverse sequence. The ordinary Tigreans will pay the highest price, while those at the top of the pyramid will most likely enjoy luxurious life in exile.

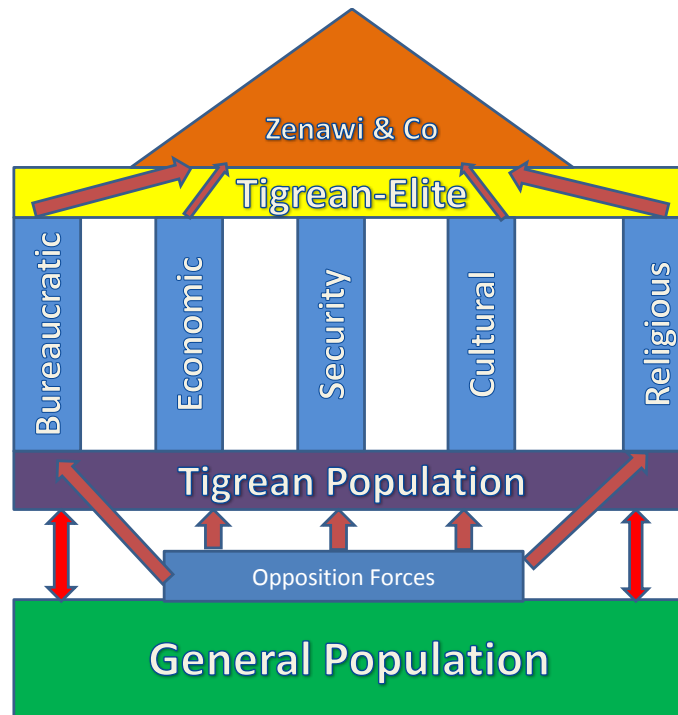
Part IV: Oppositions falling into the trap: A call for Reversing the Strategy

This situation of permanent threat and insecurity faced by the Tigrean peasants and elite in all sectors has allowed Meles Zenawi to prevent the possibility of loyalty shift amongst his ethnic support base. Predictably, his opponents have been playing their part of the game by waging anti-Tigrean rhetoric. During the 2005 election, for instance, certain opposition figures and supporters made insensitive accusations and remarks against Tigreans, which helped Meles to declare the possibility of *interhamwee* - genocide like campaign against Tigreans. Four years later, the opposition does not seem to have learned the fact that the dictator has been using their own words to strengthen his support amongst the Tigrean base. Denying the injustices that was committed in Tigray during the previous regimes, belittling the sacrifice paid by the Tigrean peasants during the struggle against Derg, and by exaggerating regional economic disparity to outright racist attack, opposition groups, especially those in exile, have been engaged in unhelpful campaigns that push away even progressive Tigreans. It's important to understand that no matter how progressive, one cannot side with a group that wages generalized war on their ethnicity. To remove the tyrannical oligarchy, the opposition should devise a strategy that isolates the oligarchy from its support base.

The following diagrams.[\[i\]](#) show the political strategy of the ruling party thus far, and an alternative that could strengthen the opposition and weaken the oligarchic regime.



The regime used soldiers and elites largely drawn from Tigray to take power. Since they were a group that defeated the previous regime, Tigreans automatically become more powerful and closer to the new regime than other ethnic groups. However, at that early stage, there was no clear segregation between them and the rest of the people. For the party, as Tigrean grievance has settled and there was no longer an oppressive regime, nationalism would eventually loosen, therefore holding power required sustaining the support and loyalty of the people of Tigray through creation of new threat against them.

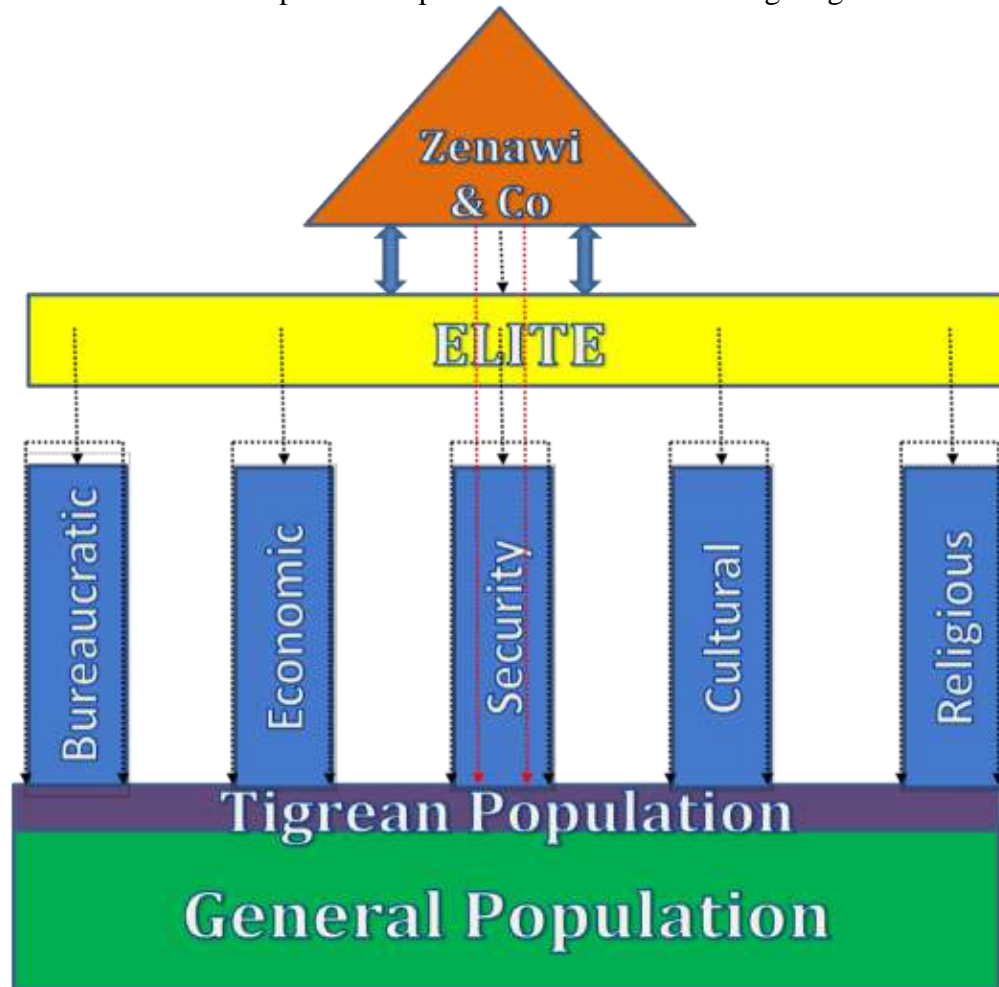


As discussed above the strategy of the regime is to isolate Tigreans from the rest of the population through creation of permanent insecurity. The pre-calculated favoritism offered to Tigray and Tigreans generates anger and resentment amongst other regions and ethnic groups which can be channeled into increased anti-Tigrean sentiment. This was exactly what the regime anticipated. So there is a pull factor, economic benefits; and a push factor, which is the increased anti-Tigrean sentiment. The insecurity, rejection and renewed fear-based nationalism forces Tigreans to become isolated and remain attached to the party.

As shown by the upward movement, the Tigreans were segregated from the general population and had to become loyal to the party. The regime uses security forces drawn from the Tigrean population to suppress its opponents. Opposition forces targeting the leadership have to fight all the way through the Tigrean civilians and elites before they get to the top. For instance when the regime rigged the 2005 election and used *Agazi* force to suppress the opposition, they were conveniently accused of attempting to commit genocide against Tigreans. The protestors retaliated by attacking Tigrean owned businesses. The Tigreans became the first line of defense against any opposition forces that target the leadership. Such a fight is difficult for the opposition, especially for those who would like to defeat the regime through nonviolent means. In addition to increasing and solidifying the Tigrean support for the regime, such ethnocentric attacks are often unpopular even amongst the general population. Here it is good to bring to attention that neighborhoods with Tigrean majorities, like 'Popolare' and "Teklehaymanot' have given their support to CUD delegates during the run-up to the 2005 elections. Even though the government tried its best to present the CUD as 'Interhamwe', right up to Election Day the Tigrean dwellers of the city were not convinced by government propaganda. Or they might have felt that the regime could lose in the election and voting for a loser would not be in their best interest. What this instance should teach us is that, when the greater Tigrean public feels safe in

the hands of the opposition, it can collaborate with them and even take side in opposition to the regime.

Alternatively, the democratic movement could adapt a strategy that can help them gradually isolate the top leadership as shown on the following diagram.



This strategy requires a reawakening of the Tigrean population towards a solidarity movement of all Ethiopians against injustice. It necessitates freezing anti-Tigrean rhetoric and focus on the criminal activities of the top leadership. When Tigreans begin to join the universal struggle against the dictatorial regime, the oligarchy would violently react showing its true nature. As tension between the regime and ordinary Tigreans, who now join others in opposing the regime, increase, elites will begin to waver in their loyalty. The social, economic and political cost of siding with a regime losing the support of its own ethnic group becomes high. Elites lose confidence in the endurance of the regime. The authoritarian regime would react by increasing repressive measures against the defecting elites, which widens the rift between the oligarchy and the elites. This hypothetical scenario is not easy to achieve, however, I believe it is the most efficient, sustainable and constructive way to fight an authoritarian that is using ethnic nationalism to insulate himself against his opponents.

Conclusion

This essay is not written to provide the Tigrean elites an excuse for their silence when the country is being robbed, and the fabric of the society is being destroyed in the name of their people. Neither is it meant to justify those who are engaged in generalized attack on the Tigrean people. The status quo is dangerous both for Tigreans as well as for the rest of the country. There are those Tigrean elites who have narrowly focused on reaping short term privileges rather than being concerned about the long term welfare of the Tigray peasants, who suffered the most to bring the elites to power. Such aggressive and blatant domination of the economy, security, bureaucracy and other institutions by a tiny minority cannot be tolerated forever. Sooner or later, the system will collapse, but the longer this regime remains in power, the higher the stakes and the more dangerous the outcome will be.

The Tigrean people paid an ultimate price to fight against state repression and injustice. Those young men and women who sacrificed their lives under the TPLF banner are myths of freedom, and will always be remembered as such by the Tigreans and all freedom loving people. They never anticipated that their blood that was spilt for the sacred cause of their people would breed tyrants who betrayed the promise of peace, prosperity and liberty. For a true Tigrean nationalist to support the dangerous project of ethno-racism being implemented by the narcissistic individuals is a betrayal of those innocent and brave martyrs.

The courageous effort by Seeye Abraha and other former TPLF leaders ought to be appreciated. It takes two parties to affect a change in the situation; the opposition should work extra hard to ease the insecurity of the Tigrean people by differentiating the Tigrean mass from the oligarchy. This can happen through a development of a common vocabulary that is sensitive to Tigrean sentiments, in order to not give a pretext for the regime to exploit inter-ethnic tensions to its benefit. But the Tigrean elites should also realize the looming danger and educate their people thus isolating the ruling clique and to bring about sustainable regime change. Silence is not helpful. The ruling cliques are so narrow-minded that they will continue their ethno-racist policies until they are forcefully ousted. Unless this policy is challenged, the result will ultimately be in a violent overthrow of the regime. When that happens, Meles and his top loyalists will retire into a comfortable life in exile leaving the innocent Tigrean mass to suffer for the crimes committed by a few opportunists. As Edmond Burke famously said “all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing”. It is my hope that the silent majority from all political spectrums would prevent the vocal, vicious and irrational opportunists of all sides from leading the country into further chaos.

[1] The diagram is adapted and modified from a presentation by Peter Ackerman at Draper Hill Fellows on Democracy and Development Program, Stanford University. August 3rd, 2009.

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