

Ethiopia's Recurrent State of Siege

-Starve the TPLF of Foreign Exchange -

Aklog Birara (Dr.)

Part II of III

Ever since its inception, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has been relentless in assaulting, demeaning, marginalizing and impoverishing the Amhara population. In its Manifesto, it identified two primary enemies of the "Tigrean people" as a flip of the same coin. These twin-enemies of the Tigrean people, the TPLF posited, are Imperialism and the Amhara. Imagine that for the TPLF core, Western imperialism and colonialism that the Amhara together with other Ethiopians fought bravely and preserved Ethiopian independence against foreign aggression, including Italian fascism are characterized as "mortal enemies of the Tigrean" people. The TPLF and its agents had the audacity to extend this animosity to others. It tried to teach hatred and ethnic division to an entire generation of Ethiopians. I find no other country whose rulers implant such hate and division and undermine their country.

Imagine further that it is lands from Gondar, Wollo and Gojjam and from major cities such as Addis Ababa and others that serve as homes and as sources of livelihood, wealth and riches for hundreds of thousands of Tigrean nationals. Amhara and Tigreans share a long history, culture, religion, economic and social bonds that should be shepherded carefully and strategically. The TPLF ideological architecture of hatred does exactly the opposite. It implants permanent scars that future generations may not be able to cure. It also creates a hostile and unwelcoming environment for all Tigreans. This is why I urge Tigreans to join other Ethiopians in the struggle to create an inclusive, fair, just and democratic Ethiopia. There is no longer a place for bystanders.

The TPLF animus towards the Amhara has defined and still defines the TPLF ideology of divide and rule. On the ground, TPLF annexation of Amhara lands and their incorporation into Greater Tigray is part of this animus. Sadly for Ethiopians, including Tigreans, with the exception of a courageous few individuals who consider the TPLF to be **venomous and cancerous**, the majority of Tigrean political elites, intellectuals and others within and outside the TPLF core sing the same song. For example, they propagate the untrue story of Tigrean nationals in Gondar, Wollo, Gojjam and the rest of the Amhara region as well as in Oromia as having been targeted and harmed. I do not know of a single Tigrean civilian that has been killed, maimed, wounded, tortured or harmed by the Amhara or the Oromo people. I find it disingenuous for the TPLF and its supporters to equate the destruction of private property and investments in reaction to murders and other inhumane treatment by the TPLF and its security forces equivalent to the murder of innocent civilians including children and mothers. Lives have greater value than property.

Tragically, the TPLF does not inflict pain and suffering alone. It has recruited and rewarded some Amhara and other ethnic groups to do its dirty work on its behest. In the Amhara region including Gondar, it is these recruits of locals, that serve as intermediaries that should be identified and isolated, especially by the bold and heroic youth movement, Fanno.

For too long, ethnic elites and so called learned Ethiopian society gave lip service to the atrocities committed against innocent Amhara in Wolkait-Tegede, Beni-Shangul Gumuz, Gambella, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples. Thousands of Amhara were murdered in several locations; and hundreds of thousands were either displaced or evicted from their lands and property.

The Amhara nationality became a target of the TPLF and its allies because the Amhara embraced the entire Ethiopia as their natural home; and intermarried and worshipped with other Ethiopians as a natural phenomenon. **The centrality of Ethiopia as a multinational or diverse country and the Amhara self-identification of Ethiopian citizenship as a distinctive and defining norm made the Amhara population a target to which others succumbed either knowingly or unwittingly.** Even Amhara intellectuals refrained from condemning atrocities against the Amhara reinforcing the mistaken premise that the Amhara people are responsible for Ethiopia's past and current ills.

The Amhara people should be proud of their commitment to diversity, to Ethiopian national identity and to Ethiopia as a country. **Equally, the Amhara people must agree on a unity of purpose; and an organization and leadership team that is impenetrable and resolute.** Survival is critical for freedom, democracy and Ethiopia's durability as a country.

It is true that the Amhara population can rightly be accused of making the entire Ethiopia its home and **Ethiopiawinnet as its prime identity.** This in itself should be commended rather than condemned. If we do not want Ethiopia to balkanize into six or more mini states as has occurred in the former Yugoslavia, it behooves us to embrace both our diversity; and the right of any Ethiopian to live and work anywhere in Ethiopia. This narrative was echoed eloquently by youth in Gondar when they uttered "The blood of the Oromo is our blood; Bekele Gerba is our hero." This utterance resonated throughout Oromia. Oromo youth responded in kind by stating that "Wolkait is ours; Tana Kegna" etc. The visit to Bahir Dar led by Lemma Megersa highlighted and strengthened the historical bonds between the Oromo and Amhara people. This narrative is transformative. It is this bond that should shape future history.

Accordingly, the Amhara and Oromo struggle for justice, the rule of law and for democracy is equally the struggle of Ethiopia's mosaic. I state again that Tigreans have an identical obligation and should join their brothers and sisters, especially youth throughout Ethiopia.

TPLF's Ethiopia suffers from a democratic deficit. This deficit cannot be filled through draconian and inhumane punishments of innocent civilians, especially Ethiopian youth. The way out is not more killing and more forcible evictions of civilians. These civilians would have no permanent home. They will return

and fight back the system that expelled them. The solution is an all-inclusive and democratic system of government.

Animosity against Amhara is animosity against all Ethiopians

Over the past 27 years, animosity against the Amhara spread like a germ and enveloped other nationalities, especially the Oromo nationality. This germ was prompted intentionally and deliberately to spread like a virus in order to divide and rule Ethiopians. The term of igniting “**FIRE AND STRAW**” (እሳትና ጭድ) characterizing the desired goal of triggering civil war among the Amhara and Oromo people should be a cautionary guide in terms of what not to do and not to echo anymore.

Today, the TPLF considers both the Amhara and the Oromo as mortal enemies and as barriers to continued TPLF political and economic dominance in particular and the interests and security of the Tigrean people in general. Sadly, the TPLF lacks the wisdom of stopping the propagation of lies in the form of ethnic hatred; and it is equally short of insight to comprehend and accept the fundamental principle that Tigreans cannot survive without the rest of Ethiopia and Ethiopians. It is undeniable that Ethiopia is their country too. As such, the people of Tigray should no longer serve as captives of the TPLF. Their rights to survive, thrive and feel safe in any part of Ethiopia depend entirely on their recognition of the equal and fundamental rights of other Ethiopians. Those who refuse or reject the rights of others have no place in a globalized world.

Further, there does not seem to be any statesman or an adult within the Tigrean elite and the newly well- to-do Tigrean **community to pressure, at least to persuade, the TPLF to stop its carnage now. Tragically for all of us, including Tigreans there isn't any time left.**

Selecting and targeting Oromo or Amhara or other Ethiopians is a crime

The TPLF cannot afford to assault 110 million Ethiopians all at once. It does not have the capacity. Instead, it singles out, targets and assaults Ethiopians in turn. In yesterdays, months and years, it targeted and assaulted the Annuak of Gambella; the Ethiopian Somali in the Ogaden; Ethiopians in Afar; the Amhara all over. Tigreans who resisted the TPLF in Tigray were also victims of the TPLF etc. So, who is left? We should not allow ourselves to be assaulted, killed and degraded in turns.

Today, the theater of massive and relentless assault is in the Oromia region where the resistance against the TPLF is most intense. This intense and continuous resistance led by youth is history-making; and is unstoppable. In fact, Oromo and other youth are doing what so-called opposition parties of any ilk have not been able to do for three decades. They are spearheading the fundamental change process. This social force is unstoppable. **No matter who the Prime Minister becomes, it is the ability and capacity to be bold and change the entire system that will matter most.** A bold Prime Minister will side with Ethiopia's youth; a timid one will do

TPLF's dirty work. A bold Prime Minister will insist that Ethiopia's defense and security forces and other critical institutions become national; and no longer partisan and ethnic.

Statistical data shows that 99 percent of top military and security officers are Tigrean. This must change in order for Ethiopia to defend itself; and in order to avert continued selective and targeted killings of non-Tigrean civilians.

Otherwise, nothing will change and Ethiopia's convulsions will persist. Youth will continue to fight and die in the process.

Just take one current example that has been instigated by the Qeerro movement and adopted quickly by Fanno and other youth movements. The 'FIRE AND FURY' that enabled the movement to shake-up the entire economy and trade includes the following:

First, the series of boycotts that took place have diminished public confidence in the system.

Second, the blockage of petroleum, gas and related products throughout Oromia and that spread quickly to the Northern Amhara region, especially Gondar; and to the heart of the repressive regime's stranglehold, namely, Addis Ababa have a devastating social impact.

The medium and long term effects of this economic resistance are far reaching; and will affect the entire society. Among them are the following notable and inevitable occurrences.

- Prices of essential goods (inflation) will rise dramatically and sharply;
- Foreign exchange shortages will be far worse than they have ever been;
- The flow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) will decline sharply;
- Investor confidence will be eroded; tourism will evaporate;
- The world community's trust and confidence in the regime will decline; and
- Pressure from all quarters for fundamental change, including a transitional government will deepen and broaden.

This is why I assert that Ethiopian youth and not the weak and fragmented opposition is making history.

What the rest of us can do

At minimum, let us be bold enough to express our admiration for Ethiopia's youth; and resist to trumpet TPLF propaganda. For example, TPLF cadres argue that boycotts and the current blockade of petroleum and gas "has no impact" on investments, commerce and trade. In one case, I argued with an EPRDF representative on VOA that the "Ethiopian economy must be based on the Planet Mars rather than in Ethiopia."

The point is this. While Ethiopian youth is doing unprecedented deed; the rest of us should not stand idle. Our historical call is to defend and support the youth-led resistance. It is to promote unity and resist division. It is to withhold remittances and channel them through informal channels and starve the regime of hard currency.

Youth is leading the resistance

Last week, the Guardian newspaper presented an eye witness account of the **Qeerro movement**, arguably the most highly motivated and organized youth movement since the height of the famous Ethiopian student movement under Imperial rule. “Twelve years ago,” one prominent Qeerro “helped organize mass protests against an election result he and many others believed the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had rigged. This landed him in prison, along with thousands of others, on terrorism charges. Since then, he has married and, like many of his generation in Ethiopia, mostly avoided politics. That was until 12 February, when he joined almost everyone in the town of Adama, and in many others cities across the region of Oromia, in a strike calling for the release of opposition leaders and an end to authoritarianism.”

This protest movement succeeded; and leaders such as Bekele Gerba have been released from prison. Hundreds of others have also been released. Thousands remain in prison and others are now being arrested and sent to the same prisons. The numbers are likely to increase under the pretexts of the new state of emergency. It is reported that the notorious Agazi has gone house to house in the city of Gondar and taken away 40 young people to unknown destinations. This is a repeat of what happened about two years ago; and won’t stop. The intent is to deprive Ethiopia of young and vigorous people that have the potential to make history. This too is a cowardly act and won’t stop the inevitable.

The Qeerro movement is unlike any other movement. It is led by youth and this youth represents Ethiopia’s future. It is highly sophisticated and networked. It has broken the walls and barriers of fear. It serves as “the vanguard of the Oromo revolution (I would add, the Ethiopian popular revolution that is also spearheaded by the **Fanno movement** in the Amhara region and similar emerging youth networks in other regions. Although these powerful and history-making youth movements are not formally linked to one another; their vision and programs are almost identical. “Ethiopia Kegna.” It is time that they are linked nationally.

A distinct feature of the Qeerro and Fanno movements, especially the former is that it is innovative and adjusts its method of struggle in accord with changing circumstances. Among others, it designs and applies practical programs of resistance such as economic and trade boycotts, blocking of road transport networks, trucks, work stoppages. The most recent announcement to initiate a 7 days program of action against petroleum, gas and other supplies indicate innovation. This is biting and hurts the entire system. I can imagine that freedom will enable this energetic and creative social force to change the economy for the better.

Ethiopia’s youth are deploying powerful and peaceful resistance tools. Boycotts and other economic instruments paralyze economic activities and investments; and derail the TPLF’s singular fame and free ride of state-led development that benefits the TPLF and its allies while leaving millions of Ethiopians poor and marginalized. They augur peaceful resistance and provide it a new and compelling meaning.

While Ethiopian youth are doing miracles against formidable odds, those of us who enjoy freedom are not doing as much. Only a few members of the Diaspora are genuinely engaged. I am sure some of us in this segment would even have the audacity to call a mother, father, brother, sister or other relative or friend inconvenienced by the boycotts and blockages and blame the victims and the youth who triggered these peaceful actions in the pursuit of freedom.

The dual life of the Diaspora and remittance flow

Ethiopia's Diaspora population is large and well-endowed in terms of incomes compared to the population back home. However, for too long most of the Diaspora has its stools and hearts in two places at the same time. Members enjoy freedom in Western countries but are unable and unwilling to fight for freedom in the country they left behind. This freedom includes the right to speak, move, own property, vote etc. Yet, they maintain their roots and travel to the homeland. In numerous cases, those who pass away overseas are airlifted to be buried in the Motherland they left behind. Ethiopia is that precious even for the dead.

There is nothing wrong with this umbilical cord, except the system that represses, oppresses, marginalizes and impoverishes the vast majority of the population. Imagine that this system empowers and encourages a selected few, primarily Tigrean nationals to become instant millionaires. Addis Ababa, the power and wealth center of the newly rich is literally owned by the few. The largest skyscrapers, condominiums and other massive buildings, at least numbering 2,800 are owned by Tigreans. Tigrean generals and other high officers are among the beneficiaries of this corrupt and exclusionary system. The poor are evicted from their lands and homes to make room for the well to do.

This untold story of rags to riches is virtually impossible to attain on merit and hard work. Easy access to lands, loans and critical supplies is possible under this system. By all measurements, **ethnic affinity** is the single most important variable that enables this rags to riches story. Political economists call this economic capture. Such economic capture is only possible under a well-integrated or merger of party, state, government and institutions. Remittances feature prominent in this capture.

In August, 2017, the European Union funded a project on the growing role of remittances in Ethiopia. "**Ethiopia Registers Fast Progress in Remittance Flow**" showed substantial increase in the amount of remittances in Ethiopia.

Before retiring from the World Bank, I read internal Bank reports and spoke to specialists there why the amount of remittances is underreported by the National Bank of Ethiopia. No one knew why; but an attempt was made to correct the anomaly. Seven years later, the EU financed consultant study showed that, at the end of 2015/2016, remittances accounted for at **least 5.3** percent of Ethiopia's GDP. "Ethiopia has made fast progress in remittance flow in recent years, Developing Market Association (DMA) CEO and specialist on remittances Leon Isaacs said." The

country “registered impressive increase in remittance from 141 million USD in 2003 to 4 billion USD in 2015/16.”

Given the make-believe statistics used by Ethiopian officials and party dominated institutions such as commercial banks and the National Bank, the figure of “\$141 million in 2003” underestimates the flow by several fold. Underreporting of actual figures is a recurring phenomenon in Ethiopia. The policy argument presented by the consultant of why the dramatic increase took place is plausible. “Subsequent directives such as zero charge tariff on transfer services issued by the National Bank of Ethiopia (NEB) to improve remittance flow has supported the country to increase remittance flow.”

If the directives are the sole variables for the increase, why is “78 percent of the total remittance being sent through informal channels?” There are numerous reasons for this phenomenon:

- Those who remit do not trust the banking system;
- The middle men and women who deal with transfers make huge profits from the remittance system;
- Remittances are exchanged into Birr and the foreign exchange is siphoned off and hidden in foreign countries (in other words, there is a huge parallel or black market);
- This parallel or black market is a source of riches for high officers, diplomats and others loyal to and or connected to the TPLF;
- Among the beneficiaries of the informal channel of transmission are TPLF agents, firms and other traders who operate within and outside Ethiopia;
- Those involved in illicit outflow of foreign exchange use and exploit the black market as a conduit; an
- Illegal migration and human trafficking aggravate the situation.

The consultant study states that “Lack of access to services in sending and receiving markets, high direct or indirect costs associated with formal channels, illegal migration and the existence of parallel market exchange rates have contributed to the high level of informal transfer. “

This is true. The biggest and most credible explanation to this **persistent phenomenon of black** market dominance in the foreign exchange market is endemic and systemic corruption. When an entire system is corrupt, institutions are degraded severely and irreparably. There is literally no accountable official or institution. The National Bank that was always independent and

professionally managed under previous regimes is now dominated by political cadres. It has lost its independence to serve the country.

The economic model supported by the TPLF core is everyone for himself/herself. “Multi-stakeholder” facilitation to steer the broken and corrupt system in the direction of productive investments using remittances as capital is virtually impossible. The few who control both politics and economics in Ethiopia believe in a zero sum outcome. This is why the benefits of growth are not shared; and why there is a glaring income and wealth inequality in Ethiopia. In simple language, the norm is “I become rich by making you poor. I build a skyscraper that I will rent by taking lands from you. I eat by making sure that you don’t” etc. This is so Darwinian that it should frighten every Ethiopian. This is why the system must go. It is incurable. This type of state led capitalism should be rejected by all Ethiopians.

I agree with the consultant that Ethiopia’s huge undocumented or so-called illegal migrant community in Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, does not have a proper formal channel to transfer hard earned monies to relatives in Ethiopia. The informal channel is harder for this group than for the Diaspora in Western economies. In light of this hurdle, it is vital for the segment of the Diaspora that enjoys freedom and the capacity to transfer remittances with ease through informal channels to assist those in Gulf countries. For this to work efficiently, there must be mutual trust. This is a deficit that we must attempt to bridge soonest.

It is possible to establish a back channel to remit from the Gulf to Western countries and from Western countries to Ethiopia. There are creative ways. For example, Somali migrants and those in the Somali Diaspora have established a sophisticated and reliable system of remitting to beneficiaries, the ultimate objective of remitting funds.

The notion of remitting monies through the formal current system of party, state and government thieves and private actors in Ethiopia does not make sense at all. It is not petty corruption I am talking about. Ethiopia continues to suffer from massive illicit outflow of funds to the tune of at least \$3 billion per year. No wonder that the country suffers from foreign exchange shortages, with the private sector bearing most of the burden.

In light of this phenomenon, there is absolutely no moral or economic or social justification to remit through the formal system. It is rotten to the core; and those at the top of the policy and decision-making pyramid and their families are the top beneficiaries. Further, formal remittances enable the dictatorship to buy arms and other tools that kill innocent people.

So, why not starve the police state that killings from accessing your monies?

I am not suggesting that you stop helping your families, relatives and friends. More than 15 million Ethiopians depend on remittances to survive. I am saying that you can do this without buffeting the police state and without enriching the few whose incomes, wealth and investment assets depend in part on remittances.

I would, instead, urge the Diaspora to reduce further the amount sent through formal channels by 30 percent.

No body, including the EU consultant study, knows the amount of remittances through formal channels. It is not insignificant. A 30 percent reduction in remittances through the formal channel will amount to about \$1.2 billion per year. Taking the doctoring and make-believe statistics into account, Ethiopia receives a minimum of \$4 billion per year through the formal system. "The flow of remittance to Ethiopia was 1.9 billion USD in 2010, USD 2.4 billion in 2012/13, USD 2.9 billion in 2013/14 and USD 3 billion in 2014/15." Maybe yes; maybe no. there is no independent authority to tell us the truth.

Incidentally, this is the same low estimate World Bank experts had put on the table internally more than 7 years ago. My own estimate was and is still much higher.

The same is true for exportable items. Ethiopia's earnings from exports continue to decline; and a bulk of the earnings are siphoned off through illicit transactions. There isn't much the Diaspora can do about this sector, except for consumables such as injera, berbere etc.

Why cater to imported injera?

TPLF supported persons and entities continue to export staples such as injera. It is inexcusable for the Diaspora to cater to this outrageous and shameful practice while millions of Ethiopians go hungry each day. My argument is based on supply. The demand for staples within Ethiopia exceed the available supply. The first and primary responsibility of the developmental state is to satisfy the basic needs of the Ethiopian people.

Injera is a commodity that is manufactured outside Ethiopia; and is marketed in bulk in towns and cities, especially in North America. So, what is the logic of shoring-up oppressors and thieves on the back of 110 million Ethiopians?

I urge Ethiopian mothers and girls to leverage their enormous influence on their families and communities so that the practice stops immediately. I urge spiritual leaders of all faiths to persuade their flock to stop catering to a killing police state and to its Diaspora supporters.

I urge the Ethiopian Diaspora to side with Ethiopian youth and withhold its hard earned foreign change. This is the least one can do to help and to signal to those who are sacrificing their lives for a better tomorrow!!!

Part III of this series will follow soon.

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