

CAN MELES FIGHT CORRUPTION?

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" Rev. Martin Luther King
There are many on going tragic stories in Ethiopia that most of us are not aware of or prefer to simply gloss over. I will try to give two paradigm of how people both collectively and individually are being mistreated by the system set up by the current government. In any case, I hope this will amplify how the people of Tigray endured 26 years of brutality and terror in the name of "National Self-Determination", "National Struggle", "People's Revolution", "Peace & Democracy", etc, high sounding words but essentially hollow and meaningless. Considering the number of people mistreated by the TPLF during and after the convention of the armed struggle, many of us undermined the armed struggle as primarily self-inflicting and heavily damaging the values of the ordinary people. Is there any household in Tigray that has not lost, at least a beloved one from either side, i.e. the Derg or the TPLF, both separately and during their confrontations?

There are over 24,000 political prisoners in Oromia. In Tigray, there are over 40,000 in the hidden incarcerating dungeons. God knows how many people that are more innocent are in the prisons of Amhara, Ogaden and other regions. Could any body be called reckless to state that Meles is running a reign of terror as far as the Ethiopian people are concerned? The whole TPLF-led armed struggle was meant for "equality, justice, peace and democracy" and to bring about fundamental social change. However, if democracy is stampeded, there could not be peace. Our predicament is that we do have neither peace nor democracy. The TPLF, as we all know, has traveled through a bumpy road. It claimed that it was far more revolutionary than all the other fronts. It fought essentially against all of them. TLF, Teranafit, EDU, EPRP, ELF, and Derg. It was at the same time jumping from ideology to ideology while calling others "reactionaries". Initially it preached Maoism, then Stalinism, then came Albanian Marxist-Leninist (Enver Hoaxa ML), then its own brand of ML the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray, (MLLT), then the Ethiopian Marxist Leninist Party. Today, somehow, the TPLF abandoned its Marxist cloak to become the most vociferous advocate of American capitalism. At the turn of every change of posture, there were victims and sacrifices were paid. Many able people were lost merely for asking questions.

However, we have gone back to square one. We are back to pre 1975. What was the necessity of all the bloodshed? So, where did the TPLF go wrong? Conversely, was it ever right? For obvious reasons we cannot dare to answer these questions here. Sooner than later we ought to answer these drawbacks if at all, we are going to start reconciling with our past. There are questions that the current government needs to answer. Why did the government start the ethnic based social division of the country? Why did the government fail to see that it the TPLF that caused the political and financial corruption is both at institutional and individual levels? That is why the EPRDF/TPLF is in the midst of financial and political corruptions of all sorts. Since it is immersed in such immoral, illegal and unethical acts, we cannot expect it to redeem itself overnight and solve the current upheaval. The TPLF had a chance and ample time (of ten years) to tackle these and many other problems from the onset. Unfortunately, it failed abysmally.

With some of the money it brought in to Ethiopia, the TPLF has created a business empire worth Eth.Birr 3.3. Billion. Out of EPRDF controlled 44 companies that run 3.5 billion Eth.Birr, the TPLF owns 32 of them. Most of the companies were state owned and sold by the Privatization Agency to the TPLF. On the main, these companies are run by a political organization for profit making, not as the name indicates a non-profit organization by the Tigray Redevelopment Agency. The companies were sold with preferential advantage to TPLF and Co. It would be naïve to assume that fair and equal competitive opportunities to bid were given to parties not affiliated with the TPLF. Some were naturally able to obtain insider information. Who will adhere to the law that states that political organizations are not allowed to run a profit making companies?

Vindictive political measures, persecution, inhuman treatment to helpless dissenters and political opposition, are some of the main characteristics that partially explain the TPLF. The victims are all members of the Ethiopian society. Because the problem affects the whole society, people collectively and individuals at large suffer for the sake of one megalomaniac personality.

a) Collectively:

There are places that Tigrayans are not allowed to go through. There are political prisoners who are not allowed visit by family and friends, prisoners whose whereabouts are not known. Nobody knows whether they are dead or alive. There are over 13 massive prisons in Tigray [i.e. like Woree, Geheneb, Tekezze, etc] in caves and valleys at various locations each with over three thousand inmates. These are beyond the known / official prisons of the cities and towns that are known to the public. Worse of all, instead of building schools, hospitals, roads, etc Meles, the leader of the TPLF/EPRDF, head of state of Ethiopia, has built the biggest prison in Ethiopia. The prison, which can take 50,000 inmates, is in Shire, Western Tigray. This is a place to keep under lock and key the whole society. For PM Meles, Sebhat and Co, this is the meaning and definition of democracy. It is the special gift of TPLF/EPRDF to the people of Northern Ethiopia.

b) Individually:

To individual Ethiopian citizens, the tragedy is even worse. We hear of journalists being imprisoned on mere pretexts. In the last four months, as we witness the TPLF splitting into two, we are also observing the PM's definition and yard stick of democracy changing according to the mood of the day, and never has followed a consistent universal definition. Thus, his senior and junior cadres have been implementing his lop-sided democracy on local people ever since the TPLF came to power. The cadres, as the walking robots of the TPLF, have been implementing policies without hesitation. That is also, where individual citizens have been victimized and suffering needlessly. We have heard of individuals being incarcerated for months and released without court hearing. Even worse, we know and have heard of individuals who were incarcerated for ten years and more, still rotting without court hearing of any sort. This is Meles's judicial system efficiently at work.

We know an 83 year old lady in Tigray who has a plot of land and an ordinary house. Her life savings is the plot of land and her old house which she and her late husband built during their working life. Our investigation concerning property taxes in different places

including Addis Ababa indicates that an average annual tax on property/ land in inner cities is not more than Eth.Birr 100.00 per annum. (In fact, the best villas in Addis Ababa only pay a maximum of Eth Birr150-200.00 annually.) [Please, ask people in Addis how much property tax they pay per year. Please note that we are also not advocating for the increase or decrease of property tax what so ever. We are just using this instance as a means of comparing and contrasting the tragedy that many ordinary Ethiopians suffer.] Can any one guess how much the old grandmother pays annually? She has been paying Eth Birr 4300. per year [Four thousand and three hundred Birr per year] for the last six years.² The question is what service does she get in return. Nothing! Zilch! What happens if she does not pay the tax? If the money is not paid on time, she will be evicted and become homeless the next day and the land will be confiscated by Sebhat and his cronies. They have been waiting for the opportunity so long now. However, the typical Tigrayan Grany is more alert at 83 than those CC members who betrayed and sold out the principles they have been struggling for over 17 years.

So the kernel of the matter is, people who struggled from 1975-91 have won a small war against Mengistu but never the victory over the battle on the fundamental issues of peace, justice, equality, democracy, development, etc. Ten years of EPRDF's rule became a decade of sleaze, downward spiral and economic degeneration. Ten years of EPRDF's reign has become marked by inward (parochial) and visionless years. I would not be surprised if tomorrow Meles put the EPRDF into a cement mixer and attempts to come out with a recycled "Democratic Party" and starts to preach to extend his reign for another ten years.

Meles has by now forgotten about corruption because the main agenda was not corruption. It was only meant to serve as an instrument to vilify others. He knew it would backfire on him. The boomerang effect of corruption is uncontrollable. In a country where officials have made corruption a norm rather than an exception, the Meles family has been running a corrupt household openly to the dismay of many of their close friends and the public at large. Unfortunately, the temptation of sugar is not confined to Tamrat Layne alone, but has become an inexorable urge contaminating most of the current leaders. The most affected are, in particular, the current leaders of the TPLF. The motto seems to be that; the country's limited wealth has to be looted with a craving addiction, whenever the opportunity is available. Nevertheless, the Meles household has been glaringly scandalous than the people we mentioned their names in our few previous articles.

Not long ago, PM Meles Zenawi was interviewed about fraud by Abiotawi Democracy. He was asked if he was involved in corruption. Naturally, in his unwavering reply Meles plainly rejected, and refuted it as ludicrous and tried to prove that he is cleaner than clean. His answer was that he does not possess anything except books and the clothing he wears. Of course, he has forgotten that he is; 1) a joint signatory with Berhane and Seyume, 2) Tewolde Agame and Seyume, etc. For the multi-million dollar deposits in the bank accounts of Western Europe and America, yes, he is right to forget this as it is under temporary trusteeship rather than outright ownership. Nevertheless, when the Day of Judgment comes the trusteeship will all evaporate into the thin air of western banks?

After 17 heinous years, even Mengistu was airlifted with the aid of money collected from the poor into a safe place via Kenya to Zimbabwe escorted by the CIA in 1991. Does it not make sense to think that the TPLF leaders have prearranged their escape when and if the time comes? They have never disclosed to the people of Ethiopia in general, and in particular, to the people of Tigray, the amount of money stashed in foreign banks. Money donated to the people of Tigray in the last twenty-five years is deposited under private accounts in London, New York, Washington, Roma, etc. According to reliable sources, the annual budget of Relief Society of Tigray (REST) way back in the mid 1980's was well over \$100m. Today it is estimated that well over \$100m is under the joint account of the above named officials alone, not to mention individuals like Habtom, and others. Is this then waiting for their rainy day? How would any one expect TPLF leaders to run an open and transparent government while they have so many things to hide?

The vexing question is what will the millions of US\$ that is hoarded in the western capitals waiting for when the hospitals, clinics, schools and other social services in Ethiopia are either non-existent or dilapidated? Has TPLF, REST, TDA, and the other institutions ever been audited? Do they show their annual budget to the public on whose name the money was collected? Are there any semblance of transparency in these and many other organizations? Why should any third party trust the individuals who do not have any inhibition to betray and slaughter each other whenever one of them gets the chance to stampede the others? Does it not rather look like a world of organized criminals with state power? The unfortunate aspect of all of this is that even TPLF CC members are not told on the over all sum of capital of their organization. If they are not investing all the financial assets of the people of Tigray in the National Banks of Ethiopia, it directly means that they are running a government and the state of Ethiopia to which they do not feel any sense of belongingness and trust.

Meles's reply that he does not possess anything except books and the clothing he wears, is not true at all. We ask Meles again if this is true to the best of his knowledge or is he running a corrupt government as well as a corrupt household? "Indian Ocean Newsletter", just over one week ago stated that, "Other members of the prime minister's inner circle who have the reputation of having enjoyed unwarranted privileges include his brother Nikodimos Zenawi (a former employee who has struck it rich), his wife Azeb (known as Lemlem and former head of Mega Net, a firm which has benefited from untaxed imports), and Benyam Mesfin (son of the foreign minister and owner of a fleet of Scania trucks)." 3

In this issue, we are less interested in Nikodimos Zenawi, and Benyam Mesfin. However, it would be of interest to see how Meles is running a corrupt family affair. Unless he declares that he had divorced the "first lady of Ethiopia", Meles must know that she has been frequently going out of the country with passports and forged names. Our "first lady" used her common names as well as other dodgy names for many insidious purposes, including depositing assets in foreign banks. When PM Meles said he only has books and cloths that he wears as Head of State, does he mean that he does not deposit his illicitly obtained money in Ethiopian Banks? Reliable sources informed us that the "first lady" uses a number of false names on her frequent travel abroad. Did Meles mean

that there is no Lemlem Molla, Azeb Molla, Aster Gonfa, Azeb Gonfa, etc that is dishonouring the Ethiopian public with forged names and a number of authentic passports?

To be fair, let us be her devils advocates. In order to illuminate the dark cloud over Lemlem Molla, Azeb Molla, Aster Gonfa, Azeb Gonfa, and who knows what name she used in the last ten years when she frequented London, New York, Washington DC, etc. let us assume that she was taking Meles's brother money to deposit out side. Let us also assume that she used different names for security reasons, as she is the "first lady". Although we know that, many respectable first ladies do not commit crime by having a forged name for protection. For the benefit of the doubt, however, let us assume that she was apprehensive and as a precautionary measure, she took a number of forged names, one after another. It also could be that Samuel Gebre Mariam issued her with too many passports to hoodwink her.⁴ Our dilemma is that our reliable sources informed us that, as much as she frequented traveling abroad, she also frequented the Markato (Addis Ababa) currency exchange shops to transfer a minimum of US\$ One Hundred Thousand at one time (i.e. per trip to the local exchange offices).

As it is said, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Meles is politically and financially corrupt. How can Meles fight corruption while benefiting and enjoying corruption himself? A person who is in the midst of corruption cannot preach to us about democracy. In democracy, there is accountability, transparency and the realization that the public is supreme, deserves respect, and thus, is more knowledgeable than the individual. Meles, as a head of state, and head of a household, has one last thing to do. Please do the honorable thing before more people spread more of your dirt all over the news media. It is never too late! Or else, the onus is on you to prove otherwise.

Wolde S. Asfaw

1 Tobia: Hamle 5, 1993 [Out of Eth.Birr 3.5 billion, TPLF's share is 3.3 billion. 94.5 million Amara region, 67.5 million Oromoa region.]

2 . Since we have the evidence, it would not be worthwhile to dispute it.

3 . Indian Ocean Newsletter No. 955 23/06/01.

4 . Samuel Gebre Mariam is a younger brother of Teklay (Aden) Gebre Mariam, who used to be head of the Secret Service and CC member of the EPLF in the 1970's.