

SOVEREIGNTY AND DEMOCRACY IN ETHIOPIA: A REFLECTION ON GEBRU ASRAT'S BOOK

Desta, Asayehgn, Ph.D., Professor of Sustainable Economic Development,
Barowsky School of Business, Dominican University of California

Over the past forty years, we have been hearing and reading a lot about the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which dismantled the inhuman and atrocious Military dictatorship that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. It was not only highly skilled in military operations but was visionary. The impression that was widely circulated was that when the TPLF came to power it would protect Ethiopia's sovereignty, adhere to the rules of law and ensure that equity and social justice would prevail, and above all democracy would be the norm of Ethiopian society.

Contrary to these assertions, Gebru Asrat (hereafter referred to as Gebru), in his book entitled "**Sovereignty and Democracy**," published by the Signature Book Printing Press in 2014, gives us a u-turn with his depiction of the history of the TPLF. Using his first-hand account and other primary sources, Gebru argues that TPLF's culture was based on secrecy. Because of naiveté and misguided propaganda, most members of the TPLF became indoctrinated with the Stalinist concept of self-determination. Thus, in the earlier times, TPLF did not reflect on the socio-cultural history of Ethiopia during its armed struggle. As stated by Gebru, the goal of TPLF was to achieve the rights of self-determination for the people of Tigray. In the case of Eritrea, Gebru states that the TPLF had a crystal clear belief that Eritrea was a colony of Ethiopia and believed that the independence of Eritrea was possible not by deliberating with the ruling fascist military regime but through the barrels of the gun.

Gebru was a Central Committee Member of the TPLF during the period of armed struggle. After the overthrow of the military dictatorship in 1991, Gebru became the President of Tigray Region, and a member of the Politburo of the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). After carefully studying and reflecting on the history of Ethiopia, the author, Gebru, has come to the point of discarding what he was socialized to master by the ideologies of the TPLF. For example, on Eritrea, he has come to asserting that Eritrea was part of Ethiopia, except that it was occupied by Italy during the colonial days. To justify his point, Gebru argues that in 1889 Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia had an agreement with Italy that Italy would return Eritrea to Ethiopia when it left. Therefore, according to Gebru's argument, in 1952, the United Nations purposely made Eritrea a protectorate of Ethiopia so that Ethiopia would be entitled to full access to the Red Sea.

Furthermore, Gebru challenges the 1991 to 1998 strategies that the TPLF/EPRDF ruling party had intended not to make Ethiopia sovereign but to legitimize the dependency of Ethiopia on Eritrea. To validate his point, Gebru asserts that the TPLF/EPRDF which is the current ruling party of Ethiopia unnecessarily asked the United Nations to use its good office to arrange for a referendum on Eritrea (i.e., though Eritrea unilaterally ruled itself for two years) so that the Eritrean people could decide to be part of Ethiopia, or claim their independence. Interestingly enough,

Ethiopia was the first nation to respond and recognize Eritrea's independence in 1993.

Contrary to the Meles Regime's argument to the United Nations that Eritrea deserved to acquire its independence, Gebru now tells us that Ethiopia's sovereignty could have been better served if Ethiopia in 1993 argued that it has to have unconstrained access to the Port of Assab along the Red Sea. More precisely, Gebru argues that this was not possible at that time because the TPLF/EPRDF believed Esaias Afewerki, the current President of Eritrea, when he repeatedly, but verbally, promised to Ethiopian officials that Ethiopia would have full access to the Port of Assab. Gebru's argument is that since now Ethiopia is deprived of having unconditional access to the Port of Assab, he emphatically asserts that Ethiopia needs to reverse its position through diplomacy. Therefore, the question we need to ask Gebru at this juncture is: is it possible for Ethiopia to have ownership on the Red Sea frontier while Eritrea is still regarded by the United Nations as having the sovereign legal rights? Given the reality as it exists now, can Gebru systematically explain how Ethiopia could have sovereignty over the Red Sea?

Furthermore, Gebru argues in retrospect that the slogan created in 2001-2002 by the then Prime Minister Meles that the economy of Ethiopia would rebound if a renaissance of Ethiopia was declared, was nothing but a window dressing slogan. Gebru emphatically argues that the slogan was purposely designed to legitimize the EPRDF's rule in Ethiopia. In addition, Gebru believes that the "renaissance slogan" was designed by the regime to help the then Prime Minister Meles and his group to consolidate power and curtail the then flourishing of democracy throughout Ethiopia. At a personal level, Gebru claims

that the Meles' regime sponsored a number of writers to write pro-government books and articles to discredit and purposely to distort the author's political group called the *Arena for Ethiopia's Sovereignty and Democracy*.

In justifying the purpose of his book, "**Sovereignty and Democracy in Ethiopia**," Gebru states that the book was written to give a different version of the existing history and that he foresees the readers of his book will be able to review and desensitize the pro-Meles propaganda messages that they have been getting which discredit Gebru and the "*Arena for Ethiopia's Sovereignty and Democracy*" Party. In addition, Gebru's book was to rewrite and straighten the distorted view of the historical development of the TPLF and also to get across his own reflections on the effects of the Algiers Agreement on the sovereignty of Ethiopia in 2000.

The Algiers Agreement was a peace agreement between the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia signed on December 12, 2000, at Algiers. As argued by Gebru, the Algiers Agreement was deliberately designed by Meles and his group to give additional land to Eritrea that it never asked for. (Eritrea was completely devastated during the 1998-2000 war period.) Finally, the book argues that the slogan of having "revolutionary democracy" in Ethiopia was solely propagated by the TPLF/EPRDF regime which amounts to nothing but an empty slogan, purposely created by Meles' regime to prolong its stay in power.

The author was kind enough to entertain constructive criticisms on the six chapters of his book. Actually, Gebru makes it clear that had he finished his book before the death of Prime Minister Meles, he would have been very happy and thrilled to

entertain a debate with the then Prime Minister Meles on the various allegations that the author had depicted about the TPLF/EPRDF ruling party. The author also strongly feels that he would be more than happy to see the ideas portrayed in his book invite other concerned Ethiopians to enter into constructive dialogues so that the book could be used as a framework to marshal the energy of various collaborations to design new trajectories for Ethiopia's viability.

In Chapter 1, Gebru's book gives a historical narrative starting from the Axumite Kingdom period up to the formation of the TPLF in February 18, 1975. More specifically, the chapter narrates a historical account of democracy and the sovereignty of the Ethiopian kingdom before the emergency of the TPLF/EPRDF. In this chapter Gebru attempts to correct some of major ahistorical accounts about Eritrean Colonialism that the TPLF has portrayed over the years.

Chapter 2 narrates the armed struggle between the Military Junta and the TPLF for about seventeen years. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the controversial issues that started within the TPLF and the rocky relationship that existed between the TPLF and other armed organizations that were struggling in Ethiopia. Finally, this chapter gives some of the cardinal factors that contributed to the complete annihilation of the Military Junta in Ethiopia and the emergence of the TPLF/EPRDF at the apex of Ethiopian political power.

Chapter 3 of the book gives a description of the relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1991 to 1998. That is, the chapter gives a bird's eye view of the unequal relationship that existed between Eritrea (*Shaebia*) and Ethiopia's

(TPLF/EPRDF) during these years. In short, as depicted by the author, the 1991 to 1998 period manifests the very challenges that the TPLF/EPRDF regime in Ethiopia faced when it was attempting to consolidate its power and restructure its economy. The *Shaebia*/Eritrea regime on the other hand, was trying to act as a regional superpower in Eastern Africa by amassing the many war gadgets that were left by the military government in Ethiopia in order to destabilize or even subjugate its neighbors.

Chapter 4 of the book discusses the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This chapter reveals how the then Prime Minister Meles and his group had skillfully manipulated the division that existed between the two groups and stopped the advancing Ethiopian military that could have made the *Shaebia* /Eritrean group bend its knees and pray to almighty God to use his power to arrest the highly galvanized Ethiopian forces that were marching to occupy the entire Eritrean State. As stated by Gebru, when the Ethiopian counter-offensive forces heard from the field that Prime Minister Meles had declared that the war would be ended once Zalambesa was liberated, we had a clear understanding that Prime Minister Meles had the intention (though some say that Meles was instructed by the United States not to advance) of saving the humiliated *Shaebia* /Eritrean forces from being completely annihilated by the Ethiopian mighty forces. However, as stated by Gebru, later when the most vocal TPLF Party officials confronted Prime Minister Meles, given that he controlled the law and police force, Prime Minister Meles counter-charged that the splintered opposing TPLF groups were involved not only in anti-democratic activities but were deeply immersed in other forms of corrupt activities.

In Chapter 5 the writer gives his account how the post Ethio-Eritrean war gave the upper hand to then Prime Minister Meles and his group, giving full control of the apparatus of the Ethiopian state. The author also discusses some conspicuous problems that arose in Ethiopia, because the entire Ethiopian nation was under the control of EPRDF Polit Bureau that was subjugated to the will of Prime Minister Meles.

In Chapter 6 the author describes that until 2005 Prime Minister Meles opened wide the door to allow different political parties to fully participate in the existing Ethiopian political scene. However, the author contends that as the Prime Minister saw that his Party had been losing ground and the Addis Ababa parliamentary seats within the Federal Government were on the verge of being controlled by the opposing parties, he reversed his position and as a dictator he restricted all the opposing parties from open access to political activities throughout the country then and in the future. What is more disturbing, the author describes that Prime Minister Meles was determined to the extent of deliberately infringing upon the rights that had been accorded to the many ethnic groups and nationalities in Ethiopia.

In conclusion, the author gives to policy makers six possible suggestions so that they might mend the situation in Ethiopia. These are: 1) Ethiopia's position along the Red Sea must be conspicuous; 2) Peaceful reconciliation needs to exist between Ethiopia and Eritrea; 3) Assure that various nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia remain united; 4) Implement the right type of Federalism in Ethiopia; 5) Practice true democracy in Ethiopia; and 6) Attempt to maintain socio-economic equity in Ethiopia.

Reflection

The author is of the opinion that his book has a different perspective than those books that have been published thus far. Given the experience of the author, the book is based on a U-shaped analysis of the TPLF history. The author's stand is based on rewriting and correcting the distorted version of Ethiopia's history by the TPLF. For someone who doesn't know Gebru, the book appears to be therapeutic and one might think that writing this book may have helped Gebru to find peace rather than what he experienced with the TPLF on the battleground and then at the apex of power from 1991 to 2000. To those who had a different understanding about TPLF, reading the book can give them a different perspective of the TPLF and the ability to examine the management system that it followed after it came to power. Mainly, as Gebru had been with Meles for more than twenty years, it is possible to say that as a student of history and politics Gebru might have given us an accurate description of the thinking and the political calibers of the late Prime Minister Meles.

As clearly given in the bibliography, Gebru has systematically used both primary and secondary sources. However, as mentioned above, Gebru's book seems to be unique because one of the purposes of the book was to instruct its readers that there is a different version of the TPLF's history. After all, who is to tell us the history of the TPLF expect Gebru who has been one of the most ardent supporters of the TPLF. That is why the book has become very popular with those who knew very little about TPLF and especially with those who are opposed to TPLF/EPRDF's rule of Ethiopia. Gebru has given the needed ammunition that the opposition group has been searching for during the last twenty years. Also, the fact

that the book is written in Amharic is a clever marketing strategy.

As mentioned before, the purpose of the book is to demonstrate to its readers that Ethiopia's sovereignty is at stake because it has been embezzled by the current TPLF/EPRDF regime. Regrettably, as an academician I could say that the author has failed to give us a theoretical framework and pinpoint the underlying factors that contribute to the idea of sovereignty as a concept. In addition, the flaw of the book is that it does not operationalize the different dimensions of sovereignty. His suggestion that the United States of America, France, Britain, etc. could help Ethiopia have sovereignty over the Red Sea doesn't seem to me a sound argument. I think the author needs further reading on the literature that relates to international relations. Given his radical thinking, I cannot imagine that Gebru would think that those nations that contributed to the balkanization of Africa or who are restlessly involved in destabilizing the African continent are going to indulge in good conscience by helping Ethiopia to have sovereignty over the Red Sea?

Similarly, if it is practiced in Ethiopia, the author fails to give us the factors that explain democracy. By the way, is Ethiopia an emerging democracy or is it still struggling to apply the centralized political or the planned centered system that the fighters were socialized to exercise? Instead of concentrating on Meles, which the writer has mostly focused on, a number of readers would have appreciated his book if the writer explained more on EPRDF's administration and management style. For example, the writer should have drawn some case studies from the Tigray Region to illustrate some of the things he did in that region where he was President for more than six years. In short, case studies from his

region would have supported his scholarly claims and would have helped the readers to appreciate some of the empirical works he did while he was the governor of Tigray, then the book could have contributed to the knowledge in his field.

Gebru's book seems credible and some of its ideas actually coincide with his rival, Argawi Berhe's writing. For example in describing the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF), who were the pioneer fighters for the independence of Tigray, Gebru tells his readers that the TLF fighters, who were having a sort of reconciliation meeting with the TPLF were instead mercilessly massacred by the TPLF while they were asleep. Similarly, Argawi (2009, p. 82) states that "in the early morning of 11 November 1975, a secret signal, which was only given to the TPLF fighters, would alert them to pin down the TLF fighters and snatch their weapons. As the ratio of TPLF-TLF fighters was one to three or four, it was believed this tactic was the most efficient and likely to cause the least or no bloodshed. It was carried out as planned, but two of the TLF fighters were killed in a skirmish that got out of hand. ... Sadly, one of the fighters who lost his life unexpectedly was Yemane Gebre-Meskel." Gebru not only admires the heroism of one of my very bright students, Yemane Gebre-Meskel, but also strongly condemns the massacre that was carried out by the TPLF.

If Gebru agrees with Argawi, why did Gebru fail to discuss in detail how much of the foreign aid that the TPLF was getting from abroad was distributed to the hungry masses and how much of it was used to finance his Party, the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT.) The distribution of foreign aid to the starving masses in Tigray during the war is still a burning issue and it is at the heart of mass media critiques.

As discussed above, Gebru has forwarded a number of suggestions for policy makers. His first suggestion is that Ethiopia should have a conspicuous position at the Red Sea because the Red Sea is Ethiopia's natural frontier. This suggestion might rekindle the heart of an Ethiopian nationalist but given the reality we have at this juncture, I think it looks like wishful thinking. Also, as I said before, the western nations look at any situation in term of their interest. For example, investors from western nations and for that matter other countries as well are likely to come to Ethiopia for only one purpose and that is to exploit its natural resources or for land grabbing purposes. I don't think it is in Ethiopia's interest to have its environment degraded for the sake of earning foreign exchange. Most of the accumulated foreign exchange from exports has been used to subsidize the rich and ruling class in Ethiopia. Instead of pushing the local people to marginal lands as is the case of foreign agricultural investment in Gambella and other regions, I suggest that it is our responsibility to learn from and then train the local peoples how to use their resources wisely.

I agree with Gebru that federating Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1952 was a miscalculation by the United Nations. Ethiopia had a feudal type of government, whereas Eritrea experienced Italian colonialism (actually Eritrea's name is derived from the Red Sea and was given to it by Italy) and the British trusteeship. Since they had irreconcilable differences, federating Eritrea with Ethiopia was like mixing apples with oranges. In retrospect, had the United Nations, as planned, allocated the Port of Assab to Ethiopia and allowed Eritreans to choose whether to be part of Ethiopia or be autonomous for at least ten years and then decide to be part of

Ethiopia or to be independent, then we would not have had the current mess that exists in that region now. I am sure, during the ten years, Ethiopia would have reformed its archaic system in order to entice Eritrea to be part it. Similarly, the Eritreans would have experienced what it means to live harmoniously with their neighbors, because unlike now Eritrea would have not earned foreign remittance from its citizens. The problem that I see in Ethiopia and Eritrea is that the two countries have never had the chance to undergo thorough, effective learning and reflective processes to appreciate what they have in common. Otherwise, they would not have continued with their parochial views nor live in destitution in the era of globalization.

Now Gebru is suggesting that there should a peaceful reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This might be possible, provided the present policy makers in Ethiopia and Eritrea are willing to settle their cases amicably. However, the question I have is, how can the author reconcile his suggestion with the comment he gave in Sweden that a peace initiative such as the "normalization campaign" is "another term for Eritrea's return to an economic invasion of Ethiopia. Normalization would have no other meaning than legalizing the Eritrean regimes right for the unbridled plunder of Ethiopian resources pre-98 style" (facebook.com, May 13, 2012).

Gebru's third suggestion that Ethiopia should design ways and means of having harmonious relationships among Ethiopian nationalities is a reasonable advice. Though I agree with Gebru and as I have written widely on the subject, the present form of federal government in Ethiopia was designed in 1991 to accommodate different ethnic-based groups. The question I have for Gebru is then, why

was Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution copied from somewhere else and pasted in to be a part of the Ethiopian Constitution when he was in power? Has Article 39 of the Ethiopian Constitution been encouraging the different nationalities in Ethiopia to agitate instead of settling peacefully as part of Ethiopia?

Reverting back to a unitary state in Ethiopia is passé. Now Ethiopians don't seem to have the appetite for either a centralized or decentralized system of government. All they want is to have a federal government that encourages and promotes self-rule, a self-rule that would help them to participate in the nomination and election of their own representatives. As stated in his book, Gebru would agree with me that the existing federal structure that we have in Ethiopia has to be altered and amended to cope with the challenges that are arising. (See **Desta**, 2014)

The cornerstone of a democratic federal polity is based on diversity. In the name of democracy, what exist in Ethiopia are political cadres chosen by the central government's officials who administer the various localities. Among other things, the most viable and necessary condition for an Ethiopian federal government is to encourage and require each community to choose its own representatives in government. So as Gebru has suggested, the practice of a sound democratic system in Ethiopia needs to be based on transparency, power sharing, and an allowance for effective checks and balances. (See also, **Desta**, 2014)

To illustrate the current economic system in Ethiopia, Gebru has identified numerous reliable sources of information. For example, Gebru has given us that 39 percent of the Ethiopian population earns

below the poverty line (\$1.25 per day). In addition when the Multi-dimensional Poverty rate is taken into consideration, in 2011 alone about 87 percent of the Ethiopian people lived below the poverty line. The rate of unemployment among Ethiopian youths is close to 30 percent. In addition, Gebru argues that though the Ethiopian economy is supposedly growing at the rate of 7.0 to 7.5 percent per year, a large part of the economy is based on government expenditure and not on consumption, investment, or net export expenditure. In addition, Gebru gives us a clear picture of the glaring inequity that has existed in Ethiopia. Also, Gebru highlights how the rate of inflation and conspicuous rent-seeking activities are devastating Ethiopia's economy.

As a caveat, I would like to add that that the government in Ethiopia promotes that it is universalizing primary education while the dynamics on the ground reveal that primary public schools in Ethiopia are inadequate furnished. In addition, as Gebru said in his book, the helpless school children are socialized to master the ideology of the ruling class. The school administrators of the various government schools are not based on professional qualification but on political cadres. The current dual schooling system in Ethiopia is challenging and highly disturbing. As Gebru sees it, the present system in Ethiopia encourages cronyism and corruption.

Conclusion

Gebru's book "**Sovereignty and Democracy in Ethiopia**" is a u-turn historical account of the Tigray People's Liberation Front. In reviewing this book, the principal criteria included, purpose, content, organization, and reference sources. To give credit to the author, Gebru Asrat's book is

well documented and is an excellent resource for students, educators, policy-makers, and others who follow the history of Ethiopia.

Starting with the Axumite kingdom, the author, as a former student of history, has shown the detailed progression of Ethiopian history. The tone of the book reflects a learned appreciation for historical documentation. As a reader, I was taken on a journey through Ethiopian history and received first-hand accounts of the formation of the TPLF, the armed-struggle, and the author's assessment of the effectiveness of the EPRDF as he was a member of the ruling class. Gebru's multi-faceted background and the fact that he has played a strategic role during the armed struggle and having been the President of the Tigray Region, and a member of the currently ruling politburo of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front or (TPLF/EPRDF as he prefers to name it) has helped him to assemble key pieces of data that span Ethiopian history. To reiterate, the book is well documented and is worthy to read.

References:

Asrat, G. (2014). **Sovereignty and Democracy in Ethiopia**: Washington, D.C.: Signature Book Publishing.

Berhe, A. ((2009). **A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation front (1975-1991): Revolt, Ideology, and Mobilization in Ethiopia**: California: Teshai, publishers.

Desta, A. (2014). **From Economic Dependency and Stagnation to Democratic developmental State**. New jersey, Trenton: the Red Sea Press, p. 96.

<http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id, May 13, 2012>