

***THE ETHIOPIAN PEACEFUL TRANSITION OF POWER: SO INCREDIBLY
INSPIRING FOR INFORMED ERITREAN CITIZENS***

By: Abdu Habib

sabbahar@rocketmail.com

“But every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all republicans. We are all federalists.” (First Inaugural Address, Thomas Jefferson, March 4, 1801)

It was amidst fears of the eruption of uncontrolled violence and possible national dissolution that we were thrilled to see the peaceful transition of power from the resigned Ethiopian Prime Minister, Ato Hailemariam Desalign, to the new Prime Minister, Dr Abiy Ahmed, taking place. Eritreans were divided among those who feared that it could be a terrifying prospect and those who were optimistic because Ethiopians have a constitution to be referred to in case of differences and institutions with the courage to act. I hate to say that a third group, which is unimaginably hostile, does not have the moral and ethical compass and too biased to see the impact of instability in one country on the whole region, wished to see Ethiopian unity falling apart, blindly thinking that they would be safe enough to dance on its grave. Nevertheless, irrespective of partisanship and political affiliation, Ethiopians proved, with all grace, that they are rational actors who realize that they have more that unite them than dividing them and that they have the wisdom others could learn from, all succumbing to the national interest and the public’s perceived priorities.

As Eritreans who view regional stability as a hugely detrimental factor for our fight against poverty and under-development, for us, the peaceful transition of power in Ethiopia was not a small thing we could shrug off. On the contrary, we have found it to be a shot at the arm, giving us a ray of hope that it would open the flood gates for all good things to happen in the country and our region at large, where our peoples are eager and growing impatient for peace, rule of law, freedom, equality, democracy and socio-economic development. Subsequently, the unifying inaugural address of the new Prime Minister alleviated national and regional fears, giving legs to the optimistic views of the peoples of the country and the region at large. Now that optimism is going on and collecting momentum. Consequently, we are

hearing daily the news about new urgent measures taken by the new Prime Minister to meet the scale and urgency of the needs of the country and its people.

With this introduction, we need to venture into the question: **Why is the peaceful transition of power detrimental to the Ethiopian democracy or any democracy for that matter?**

Experience of all Western countries have shown that non-disruptive or peaceful transition of power is a key objective of democracy in the sense that it guarantees the stability of political, economic and social life of a nation. Those of us living in the West see it happen every four years, though during our first years, we could find it a big surprise, or a political miracle, to see an Election Day as quiet as any other day in any Western city or town, where citizens vote for their political leaders according to their objective assessment and conscience. However, we do realize this did not arise out of a vacuum or overnight. These countries have developed, of course over ages and through a long and difficult democratization process, an autonomous enforcing mechanism or an effective civil service that supports non-disruptive transition. As a result, fearful bloody power transition was made impossible through ages of democratization process that had to go through a lot of zigzags and hurdles. In the case of Ethiopia too, the peaceful transition of power has saved, hopefully permanently, the country from all possible complications, and restored peace and stability in the country, preparing the ground for the resolution of some immediate problems, and start working on issues that ensure lasting peace and stability in the country. The other alternative is violence, which had disrupted the normal life of the people, during the past few months, and was very expensive in terms of life, economy, and lost opportunities for the development of the country. It was also unpredictable: nobody knew what would come out of a chaotic situation and mess.

In this connection, nobody would argue that the peaceful transition of power in Ethiopia was easy. In fact, peaceful transition of power has never been easy even in the US in 1801. That is clear from the quotation of Thomas Jefferson's speech we have cited above. Accordingly, we need to give the ruling coalition, the EPDRF, collectively and as individual parties without exception, credit for being smart enough to read the Ethiopian reality on the ground and learn from many wise men like Dalai Lama who is reputed for the following wise advice:

“Peace does not mean an absence of conflicts; differences will always be there. Peace means solving these differences through peaceful means; through dialogue, education, knowledge; and through humane ways.”

As a consequence, one would ask: *What did the Ethiopians learn from the peaceful transition of power?* The peaceful transition of power taught Ethiopians the important lesson that: it is possible to reach a solution at the end, if they listen to one another and put the national interest above narrow party or regional advantages, no matter how long their meetings would take and how enormous the obstacles are. Moreover, it tells them that once they do it for the first time, they can do it again and again, no matter who the running parties are, until it becomes institutionalized like it happened in the US, where it started in 1801 and has been done during each four-year election. Now it is an automatic process in which the enormous authority of the president moves from someone leaving office voluntarily, without a bullet fired, to another by constitutional procedures. By now, the procedures have been repeated for over two centuries, and Americans remember the first day it happened with glory and pride. Taking all that into consideration, we have enough reason to hope that Ethiopia will be the forerunner in our region in institutionalizing these democratic procedures, reminding other peoples of the region to listen to Lama Lama and benefit from his advice, as they did.

As the historic achievement was hard won, it should be protected from its enemies, while the Ethiopian people should realize how great a debt they owe to their folks who went through the blood and suffering of the Revolution of 1974 and earlier coup attempts. In few words, Ethiopia is now in the modern era, and we hope it will develop that path further. But the question remains: *Did that get enough appreciation?*

Of course, from our observation, we cannot say that all have accepted and valued that peaceful transition of power. Specifically, we have already seen lots of smear campaigns, pessimist views, meritless objections, misleading analysis, and even hate speech in the social media, specially from some Ethiopians who live in Diaspora in peace. The irony is that these Ethiopians hastily tend to destroy the faith of the Ethiopian people inside the country in this significant development, depicting it as a non-transition transition or an act to buy time by the ruling coalition, though it is too hasty and imprudent to rule out the possibility that it would lead to deeper democratization and lasting peace. True, we realize that peaceful transition of power is not an end by itself, but needs to lead to measures

and policies that would answer the public demands, without which it would be impossible to ensure sustainable peace and stability in the country. But as the first step, I think it needs to be appreciated, nourished and supported; not undermined. This is the way things begin and through time and devoted efforts of all, we could see more radical changes that would unite the country further and bring sustainable peace and prosperity for all, given the vitality, unique background and skills, devotion and popularity of the new prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, who many hope would turn Ethiopia into a model for all our peoples in the region, while the other peoples of the region stand in solidarity with the people of Ethiopia during this important time of transition of power and the continuing challenges. In few words, Dr. Abiy Ahmed should be given the time, the resources, and the support to finish the job he has started and had highlighted in his inaugural address.

One of the most important components that attracted the attention of Eritreans in the inaugural speech of the new Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, was the Ethio-Eritrean relations which he described in a very touchy and meticulous manner, expressing the readiness of his government to end the outstanding border conflict between the two countries and calling on the Eritrean side to reciprocate. The answer of the Eritrean side that came through the Minister of Information, Yemane Gebreab, is one more piece of the puzzle about the Eritrean ruling gang we need to look at here.

The Eritrean side said that the call is by no means different from those made by his predecessors, past prime ministers, and that Eritrea will only talk to the Ethiopian Government after they withdraw from the occupied Eritrean territories. As this response conceals as much as it reveals, and at the same time is strange and rare, it raises many questions, among which are: *Does that response pass the test of diplomatic standard? Was that a principled position or just taken from other considerations? Is there really a desire from the part of Eritrea to correct the relations with Ethiopia? Is Eritrea in a position to fight and return its territories by force? What other tools does the Atse possess in order to use against Ethiopia?* I hate to waste time on this issue because the Atse has been remarkably consistent, but as the regional situation is totally different now, the issue merits some reflections.

Though the response from the Eritrean side was entirely disappointing for the Eritrean people, whose pain and anguish mean nothing to the Atse, the fact that the Atse ordered his minister to give a response to the call made in the inaugural address is strange, rare and does not pass the standard of diplomatic test. With

regard to the content of the response, no one would be surprised, given the political stupidity and the absence of wisdom of the gang leader, who always earns a falling grade whenever he interacts with his neighbours. These points are made by way of general remarks, and would prepare me for more specifics below.

To begin with, as a peaceful transition of power, among other things, means peace building, conflict resolution, development, justice and the protection of human rights, Atse Isias detests all these and should naturally be offended by the smooth transfer. Further, the fact that the new prime minister took an oath should offend the dictator who rules by his unchecked will because he is against institutions, law, and order. The second issue is that he does not have the desire to correct the relations with Ethiopia. The question here is: **Why?**

The excuse for the beginning and continuation of the indefinite military service, the suspension of the constitution, and the arrest and detention of G-15 members has been the occupation of Bademe by the Ethiopians. His obscured justification is: "We are in a state of war with Ethiopia." This is the way he has prolonged his dictatorship, and correcting the relations with Ethiopia through the implementation of the border settlement means the expectation to end the military service, the implementation of the constitution, and the release of G-15 members: all three, in effect, leading to the end of his dictatorship. This will take us to the question: *Is his demand for the implementation of the border settlement as a pre-requisite to start talks with Ethiopia reasonable?*

International justice and traditional diplomacy or talks have roles to play, but they usually act in concert either in the on-going conflicts or post-conflict settings. That is why Ethiopians accepted the verdict or the international justice but demanded to engage in discussions before its implementation. They know that the two are not mutually exclusive and that the approach is a basic premise of co-existence that needs to be accepted. On the flip side, the Atse separates the two, insisting that Ethiopia should first withdraw from the occupied Bademe before talks because he knows it would not be accepted. This in turn shows, from the side of the Atse, the absence of the desire to correct relations with Ethiopia.

One would understand the assumption that the personal relations of the Atse with the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi might have affected the settlement of the issue and might had created a deadlock between the two countries. If this hypothesis is true, any reasonable person would think that the death of Prime Minister Meles and the succession of Ato Hailemariam Desalign should have

changed the environment and led to the end of the conflict. That is what anyone would expect from a reasonable person, but the Atse has other calculations: creating the impossible for the implementation of the settlement. Based on all these, one would go to the extent of saying, even if Ethiopians accept his condition and show readiness to give up the occupation of Bademe before any talks, he would create other obstacles, thwarting the implementation of the settlement of the border issue. That is why we raise the question: Is *there really a desire from the part of Eritrea to correct the relations with Ethiopia?* I cannot imagine that the answer is “YES”.

Additionally, Eritrea is totally isolated from its neighbours because the Atse has made the country build a wall against itself. The only neighboring country, with which Eritrea had good relations since independence, though it was always on and off, is the Sudan. As the policy of the Atse is always burning bridges, instead of building trust, the relations with the Sudan is not different from those with Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Yemen nowadays. As a matter of fact, now the wall Eritrea has been building against itself is complete and solid. That in effect means total isolation in the immediate neighbourhood.

Accordingly, anybody would be struggling to see why the Atse hits the gas pedal in the conflict with Ethiopia at the time Eritrea is completely isolated from all its neighbours, though a new prime minister is stretching a hand of peace. In other words, any sane person would tell the Atse to seize the opportunity and use a more conciliatory approach, giving positive gestures followed by serious efforts to utilize friendly countries to mediate. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, it is very difficult for Atse Isias to understand that talking about peace is not enough. He needs to realize that he must believe in it and work on it too, as Eleanor *Roosevelt* (1884-1962), the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, advises. At the same time, President Mandela had an important advice to which Atse Isias has to pay great attention, if he thinks he is a statesman. Mandela said:

“If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.”

That was the smart thing any sane person in the street would also tell him to do. But the issue is: *Who dares to tell the truth to the Atse?* First, public opinion does not matter in Eritrea because it is a totalitarian state, where only one person has the voice and that is the leader of the gang. Second, all ministers and others in his orbit are afraid of their shadow. This is the most difficult position to be in for any

country. Simply put, the Atse thinks that he is struggling to prolong the life of his dictatorship, but on the contrary, he is creating the conditions he wants to prevent.

As we saw it above, the problem that is going to meet the new Ethiopian Government is the same the previous governments had to meet: a trouble-some Eritrea that works with the enemies of Ethiopia and stabs at the back; not constituting direct military threat. Our last question in this piece is: *What does the new Ethiopian Government learn from the previous governments concerning the handling of Eritrea?* We do not want to lecture the new government on what it should do, but as our interests and those of the Ethiopian state coincide, we expect it to effectively help the Eritrean justice seekers to uphill their struggle against the regime so that they stop the systematic withering away of the Eritrean state and the cleansing of the Eritrean people in which the ruling gang has been engaged, pull the gang from its roots, and build the new Eritrea on its ruins.

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“RUHUS AWDAMET”

(FOR OUR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY)