

Contested Politics in Ethiopia, Post of 2018: Challenges and Prospects of the Ruling Party

Mengesha Robso Wodajo ^{1*} and Odomaro M ²

¹History and Heritage Management Department at BHU,

²Philosophy Department

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***Corresponding author:** Mengesha Robso Wodajo, History and Heritage Management Department at BHU.

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Abstract

Preface:

The theme of this paper is highlighting the political, economic, democratic, historical dilemmas and realities that occurred in the Ethiopian political system in 2018 through popular rebellion; futuristic hinders and chances of the ruling party to sustain its popularity and prosperity of the country. Talk of Ethiopia conjures a whole range of metaphors and contradictory perceptions and misconceptions. With the ascendance to power of Dr. Abiy Ahmed, as Prime Minister of Ethiopia on April 2, 2018, the strategic Horn of Africa country is back in the global limelight. The political excitement in Ethiopia has not yet died out even though there is guarded or cautious optimism. Part of the reason why there is such great excitement about both Ethiopia and current ruling party members is the manner in which the political transition took place. First, there were massive protests across the country that nearly tore the country apart. Second, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn did the honorable thing and resigned amidst rising political tensions, supposedly to pave way for radical political reforms and to be part of such process. Analysts are still guessing what this process would be. What is well known is that the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)--a coalition of ethnically based parties--painstakingly held lengthy meetings and finally settled for Dr. Abiy as the chairperson of the ruling party and subsequently was endorsed as the Prime Minister of Ethiopia. The rest, as they say, is history.

While the current ruling party (PP) political honeymoon is still on, it is important to ponder and ruminate over the mythical and mysterious polity known as Ethiopia, which has puzzled scholars for centuries if not millennia. A lot has been written and will continue to be written about this fascinating African polity, popularly nicknamed the "Land of origins." This is because of the archeological findings of the oldest hominid called "Lucy" or "Dinknesh" in Amharic. By this fact alone, Ethiopia is placed in an interesting historical epoch and stands in a class of its own in the entire world. Not to forget that Ethiopia also is very much talked about in the Biblical narratives right from the Old Testament (Cush in Genesis, Moses having married an Ethiopia in Exodus, the Queen of Sheba's historical visit to Jerusalem to seek the wisdom of King Solomon, the Ethiopian Eunuch of the Acts of the Apostles who was baptized by the Apostle Philip, after he had read from the book of prophet Isaiah).

I will use Pan-African and Afro-Politian conceptual and theoretical frameworks to shed some light on Dr. Abiy's Ethiopia in the broader global political economy. It is important to state right away that Ethiopia remains an enigmatic polity that defies clear cut categorization and conceptualization. One of the main goals for this piece is to start what will be a long discourse about Ethiopia amidst the current political trajectory that Dr. Abiy has embarked on, as a dynamic, forwarding looking, Pan-African, peace and security analyst and young leader. This is an aspirational and prescriptive approach since it is too early to tell what Dr. Abiy's political and economic performance will be in the years to come.

The continental context and mood are that of the much talked about Africa rising



narrative, Agenda 2063, Sustainable Development Goals, demographic dividend, African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA), and the increasing attractiveness of Africa as a choice destination for foreign direct investment. Since Dr. Abiy's Ethiopia is home to the AU, one cannot talk about the destiny and fortunes of one ignoring the other. Ethiopia is, in a way, the mirror of the entire African continent's paradoxes and contradictions: (1) rich and complex cultural diversity; (2) simmering ethno-politics; (3) underdevelopment amidst enormous natural resources and financial illicit flows; (4) brain-drain amidst limited capacity; (5) nascent democratic and governance institutions; (6) tension between tradition and modernity; (7) centrifugal and centripetal political and economic forces; (8) tension between the sacred and the secular; (9) increasing gap between rich and poor; (10) Quest for home-grown solutions while heavily relying on foreign aid, foreign direct investment and imported goods and services. We can call these challenges as ten problems with African development. Fix them would bring new boom of prosperity light to all Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular.

Introduction:

A Paradoxical Mythical and Mystical Polity with Manifest Destiny in Global Affairs:

That Ethiopia still fascinates scholars, politicians and development agents, is not in dispute. But it also intrigues many in equal measure. It is a political enigma in the Horn of Africa, and no scholar has been able to fully grasp the territory that was once referred to as the "Land of Prester John." Few countries on earth can claim to have a history that goes back to the mythical biblical times, share narratives with ancient Egypt, provide one source of the might Nile river (the other source being in Uganda), be home to ancient and medieval monasteries, host dozens of World UNESCO World Heritage sites, have the hottest area on earth, be home to all major world religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), have its own alphabet, be home to over 80 ethnic communities each with a distinct language, and be both modern and ancient.

Psalm 68 states that, Ethiopia shall lift up its hands in prayer to God. This prophetic pronouncement that reappears in other forms in other Old Testament passages situates Ethiopia in the divine plan of God. And truly in Ethiopia hands are lifted up in prayer to God. Numerous Orthodox and other Christian churches decorate the entire expansive land of Ethiopia, followed by numerous Mosques. There are also animist religious traditions that are not usually spoken about. The most dramatic religious monuments are the rock hewn churches in Lalibela and the controversial belief that the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant is kept securely in Axum at the Church of Our Lady of Tsion. Millions of pilgrims and tourists have flocked to Axum and Lalibela to catch a glimpse of these amazing sacred spaces. The connection of Ethiopia to the Solomonic dynasty is narrated in the famous ancient book *Kibre Negest* or the *Glory of the Kings*, that claims that when the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon, she conceived a son with King Solomon. This son, it is believed, was Menelik I. The veracity of these claims defies verification since historians have not reached consensus on what in fact was Ethiopia of that time, or even where Sheba was actually located. However, if you cannot prove something to be true, you also cannot categorically deny it to be true. Joseph Flavius, a famous Jewish historian also narrates the story of the Queen of Sheba

whom he says was a queen both of Egypt and Ethiopia: "There was then a woman Queen of Egypt and Ethiopia; she was inquisitive into philosophy, and one that on other accounts also was to be admired." Ethiopia will remain a land where myth, mystery and history meet, for centuries to come.

It is not only the Old Testament that speaks a lot about Ethiopia (regardless of how one defines Ethiopia of the Old Testament), even the New Testament has several references to it. Philip the Apostle met an Ethiopia treasurer of Queen Handace who was reading a book of Isaiah (Acts of the Apostles 8:26-39), and after explaining to him what he was reading without understanding, he baptized him. Tradition has it that it is this convert who brought Christianity to Ethiopia.

A terrain where you have all major world religions converging, you will definitely have world civilizations converging, if not competing. So, you will find Chinese, Indians, Americans, Europeans, and Africans, side by side on the wide and recently tiled streets of Addis Ababa. This is not Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" but the convergence of civilizations, for the moment. Chinese, Indian, Ethiopian, Turkish, French, Kenyan, and Italian restaurants are shoulder to shoulder in the streets of Addis Ababa. A stop at Edna Mall around Bole will bring you face to face with Hollywood Movies like *Black Panther*, and if you move a few meters away you will be at Yod Abyssinia watching traditional cultural music and dance from the various ethnic communities of Ethiopia. Food at Yod Abyssinia will be traditional Doro wat, Injera, Kitiffo, Tebs and traditional Gomen vegetable. While at Edna Mall the main food and drinks will be chicken, chips, pop corns and coke. A few meters away from Edna Mall you will find an imposing Orthodox Church. Tradition and modernity live side by side—malls as temples of global capitalism and churches or mosques as temples of global faiths.

And yes, even matters of health and wellness carry the consistent paradox. Spas with sauna and massage parlors for the affluent Afro-politans and expatriates provide stress relief, while ordinary pious Orthodox and other Christians immerse themselves in or sign themselves with holy water at the entrance of churches. Hot springs near Hilton and in Sodere in Nazareth, are choice destinations for those who seek wellness infused with divine aroma-aqua therapy. On the feast of Timqat or Epiphany (celebrated by millions of people from Ethiopia and abroad), the pious faithful are sprinkled with Holy water, while others immerse themselves in the pool of water in Gondar.

You may hold your own beliefs on the supernatural, but I do not see how such a country fully immersed and imbued with sacred and religious symbolism can decline in reverence and awe for the divine. Forget the once trending scholars' secularization thesis that dominated Western academia. Even during the tense times of the mass protests, state of emergency that rocked the country since 2016, religion and divine invocation was a dominant theme. When there was some claim of a supernatural phenomenon in Bole Bulbula to the effect that Mary might (since the investigation is still going on) have appeared to a Salesian Polish Nun Alexandra, those who strongly believe in such supernatural phenomena were quick to link the phenomenon with divine intervention to save Ethiopia from a political cataclysm. And indeed, hundreds of devout Christians (both Catholic and Orthodox) flocked to Bole Bulbula to see the alleged apparition but also to pray for peace in Ethiopia. The image of Our Lady that supposedly appeared on a piece of cloth has since gone viral. The cloth was taken to the Vatican for careful examination. This



phenomenon, if it is validated, will also add to the global visibility of Ethiopia and contribute to the sacred global political economy of the Land of Prester John.

Recent Free Space to Journalists and Researcher /Writers:

With the rise in mass protests across Ethiopia, that eventually gave rise to the shift in power dynamics, the EPRDF itself admitted that there were mistakes in governance and democratic participation. With this admission, the suggestion was that there should be more inclusive participation—widening the political space. Political prisoners were released and some of the most critical independent journalists who had been imprisoned such as Nega (on terrorism charges), were released. One famous political scientist turned politician Dr. Merera Gudina, who had been arrested after his trip from Europe, was also released from prison. In a situation where political and economic spaces are tightly controlled, do not expect free flow of ideas and knowledge guided by objective and rigorous research. Intellectual and academic freedom require political and economic freedom. The most obvious challenge that researchers face in a highly controlled state systems is the limited access to internet and current literature. Dr. Abiy being an intellectual and scholar in his own right, it is hoped that he will be more at home with press freedom and frank intellectual exchange. This will be another litmus test of his commitment to opening political space.

Scholarly interest in Ethiopia is not something new. Apart from Egypt, Ethiopia ranks no. 1 in terms of scholarship on ancient African societies. When scholars speak about African studies, they exclude Ethiopia and create a separate category of Ethiopian Studies, given the unique history and geographical location. The controversy and polemics on this categorization will not detain us. Philosophers and theologians have also tried to do scientific research on Ethiopian manuscripts hidden in ancient monasteries that date to the medieval period. Due to the fact that these manuscripts are written in an ancient language known as Ge'ez, it is exceedingly difficult to unravel the hidden mysteries in these manuscripts. Some scholars have even traced Ethiopian philosophy to the modern period of Rene Descartes. The much-studied Ethiopian philosopher Zara Yacob occupies a special place in knowledge production. Surprisingly, it was a Canadian Jesuit philosopher Prof. Claude Sumner who popularized Ethiopian philosophy and wrote several volumes about it. He studied both Zara Yacob's philosophy and also Oromo wisdom literature as expressed in proverbs and folk tales. The type of philosophy found in proverbs and folk tales is what some call ethno or sage philosophy. Another Jesuit researcher Van de Loo studied Guji customs and proverbs. A close look at these studies reveals how all the research so far done on Ethiopia is just a scratch on the surface. Ethiopia is not just layers of time but also layers of truth that one keeps unearthing with time. A question is usually posed: "how long does it take to understand Ethiopia for a research?" The answer goes like this: "One year to understand the language Amharic (and there are other over 80 languages); two years to understand the culture; three years to understand the economy; four years to understand politics; five years to understand religion; and eternity to understand the whole country and its people!" Then the conclusion is that it is only God who understands Ethiopia. This makes it exciting since there is always something hidden to learn.

As way back as the 17th Century a famous Jesuit by the name of Pedro Paez (1564-1622) dared to write a comprehensive history

of Ethiopia in two massive volumes covering anthropology, botany, geography, religion, politics, culture and even theology. This history has been recently translated into English for the first time. With this scholarly publication, some of the myths and legends about Ethiopia have been laid to rest, and a foundation for further inquiry has been laid. The main reason why Ethiopia has been a great source of fascination among scholars and international relations experts is its strategic location close to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and in a very strategic geopolitical location known as the Horn of Africa. As early as the 16th and 17th Centuries, European imperial powers, explorers and missionaries were busy figuring out the legend of priestly and royal King Prester John. The deeper motive for fascination with Prester John was the challenging advance and expansion of Islam in the backdrop of Christian crusades. Not surprisingly, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) got entangled in the dramatic quest of Prester John and used this intriguing phenomenon to strategically explore possibilities of consolidating the Christian faith in Ethiopia. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits took a personal interest in the question of Prester John and dispatched some of his most talented Jesuits to Ethiopia in the 16th and 17th Century. By that time, Ethiopia had become a theatre of complex geopolitical rivalry and theological debates on the nature of Christ—whether he was both human and divine.

Jesuits who were working closely with the kings of the time, naturally found themselves in the middle of these protracted debates. Because of intimate interaction with the Ethiopian rulers and elites of the time, Jesuits contributed immensely to the intellectual and cultural production of medieval Ethiopia. The journeys of Jesuits in Ethiopia, especially Fathers Antonio Fernandez, Almeida, martyrdom of Fathers Francisco Machado and Bernado Pereira, their interaction with Kings of the time, are meticulously documented in Almeida's History, Book,s VII-VIII. What is paradoxical about Ethiopia's medieval era is the exposure to the then imperial powers of the time such as Portugal, Spain and the Papacy, and at the same time Ethiopia being sheltered from the rest of Africa. The well documented correspondences between Ethiopian Kings and Popes of the time suggest a great deal of interaction between Ethiopia and Europe. Some papal legates commonly known as Nuncios were being sent from the Vatican to Ethiopia. One wonders why the vibrant Christian faith that flourished in Ethiopia since the Acts of the Apostles did not spread to the rest of Sub-saharan Africa.

The challenge that all Christian missionaries who come to Ethiopia have to grapple with is what role they have to play in a country that has had a vibrant Christian life since the 4th Century when King Ezana officially declared Ethiopia a Christian country. Confronted by such a challenge, some expatriate missionaries settle for provision of social services and try to steer away from trying to make converts. But still this does not solve the issue since not all parts of Ethiopia have been evangelized. Quite a bit of studies have been made on missionary strategies in Ethiopia, with special focus on the role of Jesuits. Just to demonstrate how Ethiopia has been of great interest for the then Christendom of the 16th Century, St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote three documents between 1553 and 1556, instructing Jesuits on how to go about their missionary work in Ethiopia. In 1553, St. Ignatius wrote a letter to King King João III (1521–1557), that contains instructions on who among Jesuits should be sent for the mission in Ethiopi, and especially, who should be appointed the Patriarch, as well as succession procedure. This first document is called



‘Information for His Highness on the people of our Company who seem to be suitable for the kingdoms of Prester John’.

The second document was written in 1554--Instructions which may help to bring the kingdoms of Prester John into union with the Catholic faith and Church—following the decision to appoint João Nunes Barreto (1520–1568) to become Patriarch of Ethiopia. Given the complicated history and traditions of Ethiopia that outsiders could not easily understand, some of the instructions and recommendations in this document led to some serious misunderstandings between Jesuits and the Orthodox Christians of Ethiopia. The third and final document that was written in 1556--Summary of things necessary for Ethiopia—was more of practical procedures for Jesuits who were sent to Emperor Galawdéwos' (1540–1559). St. Ignatius of Loyola who was a man of details and a strategist, spelt out how Jesuits were to relate with the local clergy and also how bishops were to be consecrated in Ethiopia.

Even though Ethiopia of the global middle ages is largely the Ethiopia of Kings and imperial European rivalry and missionary adventures, it is still being studied by historians up to today. Since most of the writings of this period were written in Latin, Portuguese, Italian and Spanish, the English-speaking world looks at the recent English translations and works in English with a fresh look. Among the leading scholars of Ethiopian studies, Professor Richard Pankhurst occupies pride of place. He has written scholarly works on Ethiopia's economic history, towns, medicine, education, slave trade, trade, and culture. Paul B. Henze took bold step to write Ethiopian history from the remote past to the modern time addressing issues such as: the rise and fall of Aksum, Zagwe and Solomonic dynasties, architecture, painting, handicrafts, and Ethiopia's interaction with the Near East, Arabia, and the Indian Ocean. In all these interactions, what is commendable is Ethiopia's resilience and keeping her culture and beliefs intact to a great extent. Matteo Salvatore, Assistant Professor of History at American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, recently published an excellent work that can be considered the best intellectual history of Ethiopia during the middle ages. Salvatore writing in 2017, digs deep into Italian and Portuguese sources to unravel Ethiopian and European relations between 1402 and 1555. A close look at both religious and political motives of the time, reveals how Europe influenced and was influenced by Ethiopia in equal measure. Sites of mutual influence were, royal palaces, monasteries, markets around the Red Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Indian Ocean, Lisbon, Jerusalem, Venice and Goa. Important to recall that Portugal intervened in support of the Christian monarchy in the Ethiopian Adal War.

Of course it is a mistake to assume that European encounter with Ethiopia took place only in the Northern Highlands and around palaces of Kings, or that Ethiopia is one monolithic culture, as some people wrongly assume, far from it. A social and cultural historical analysis reveals the contrary. For instance from 1846 until 1880, Massaja, a Capuchin missionary served as Vicar Apostolic among the Oromo of East Africa for over three decades. It is during this period that the Italian interest in Ethiopia got consolidated. The issues that Cardinal Massaja struggled with such as Muslim-Christian relations and Orthodox-Catholic relations, are still of great concern in Ethiopia even today. In those days, prominent missionaries played both political and diplomatic roles. Another missionary who played a similar role in the Apostolic Vicariate of Abyssinia is Giustino de Jacobis. Bishop Daniel Comboni played a similar role in Sudan. On the

role of priest in Ethiopia during between 1830 and 1868, Donald Crummey has done an impressive study, focusing on: political interaction; the central role of missionaries in the genesis of modern Afro-European relations; Ethiopian leaders dealings with representatives of a foreign society; missionary strategies; attitudes towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; and identification of Christianity with European culture.

In the 20th Century, scholars started to expand discourse on Ethiopia to include other ethnic communities in an attempt to comprehend the evolution of a complex multiethnic society and polity we call Ethiopia. A few illustrations will suffice. Budge E. A. W., explored the history of Ethiopia from Nubian and Abyssinian perspectives. Donald Levine, once a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, tried to synthesize the Ethiopian multiethnic reality, by exploring the Semitic civilization, differentiation of peoples and cultures, Amhara, Oromo and Tigrean legacies, and emerged with Greater Ethiopia project. William A. Shack studied kinship, local organization, family, marriage, clanship and ritual, and religious organization of the Guraghe. Picking up from where William A. Shack stopped, Daniel Teferra took the study of the Guraghe a step further and developed what can be called an “indigenous African economic philosophy” by studying Guraghe entrepreneurship. Teferra's conclusion is that a peaceful and cooperative work ethic that includes frugality. As a result, they are one of the most enterprising people in Ethiopia. To paraphrase Max Weber, one can posit a thesis: Gurage ethic and the spirit of capitalism! If there is such a thing as Africapitalism (a fusion of African values of solidarity, hard work and sharing with capitalist spirit of competition, saving and free enterprise), then the Gurage would be its best manifestation.

Influenced by post-modernism and subaltern analysis, some scholars have tried to expose the scholarship of erasure where some marginalized minority communities have been neglected from mainstream Ethiopian studies. This is what Dena Freeman and Alula Pankhurst, in their edited work, *Peripheral People, The Excluded Minorities of Ethiopia*, written in 2003, tried to do. So who are these excluded minorities? It is the Southern Ethiopia craft workers and hunters, blacksmiths, potters, tanners, woodworkers, and weavers. Not only is their contribution to the economy of the country not recognized, they are also considered as less human, outcasts, and they are even considered and feared as purveyors of evil and supernatural powers. They are marginalized socially, economically and politically. These excluded and marginalized groups are spread across Ethiopia and live among the major ethnic communities: The North-East: Gurage, Yem, Kambata; North-West: Kaffa, Shekacho, Dawuro; The South-West: Malo, Oyda; The Centre-South: Gamo, Wolaita; The South-East: Sidama, Konso; Urban or Semi-Urban Areas: Shashemene and Woliso. Politics of exclusion and marginalization can very easily move from minorities and subtly cross over to majorities, as long as the logic of domination and marginalization is the operative mode.

A Contested Intellectual and Political Terrain:

The title of this article is “Contested Politics in Ethiopia: Post of 2018: Challenges and Prospects of the Ruling Party.” This was deliberate. The discussion so far has steered away from controversies around Ethiopian studies and the politics of knowledge. The discussion has touched on the political economy



of Ethiopia and its democratization process. It is now appropriate to embark on a cursory look at Ethiopia's contested intellectual terrain in the backdrop of its long march to modernization and democratization. Important to state at the outset that some of the contradictions hinted at in the previous sections such as complex and diverse ethnic identities, contested historiography, foreign relations, and religion, play a crucial role in the complicating the process of nation building and consolidation of democracy in Ethiopia.

From a geopolitical point of view, there is a contestation on where Ethiopia lays, Eastern Africa or Horn of Africa? By the fact that Ethiopia is the headquarters of the African Union (AU), this gives it a strategic position within the African continent. But there is some centrifugal force (real or imagined) that tends to pull Ethiopia to the Orient. One obvious factor is religion. Both Orthodox Christianity and Islam are global faiths that enjoy a universal appeal and try to extend their influence globally. Ethiopia is therefore tied to the Near Eastern and Middle Eastern religious loci. No intellectual discourse can ignore this fact. This is both an advantage and a challenge. Intellectually, this makes Ethiopia like a moving target that defies easy conceptualization.

Just to cite another example from regional integration discourse. Ethiopia is part of IGAD, but Ethiopia is not part of the East African Community. Two of the main countries of the East African Community Kenya and Uganda are very close to Ethiopia, with Kenya sharing a border with Ethiopia to the South west. If there was a road linking South Sudan to Ethiopia, Uganda would be a few hours from Ethiopia by road. Has the epistemic gap generated a geopolitical barrier in the Horn of Africa? The fact that Ethiopia was not colonized during the scramble for the rest of Africa, does not cushion it from the negative impact of colonization chief among them being the balkanization of Africa into small unviable states. Using a Pan-Africanist discourse, it is easy to notice that colonial architecture that curved Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, South Sudan, Uganda and Sudan out of the Horn of Africa or East Africa, also affected Ethiopia directly. The much talked about Ethiopian isolationism can be traced to this colonial project that created spheres of influence for Italy, Britain and France around Ethiopia, in a territory that would be one large geopolitical entity.

What about inside Ethiopia? Inside Ethiopia there are some intellectual currents of contestations along philosophical and ideological lines. Ethiopia like other states in Africa, regardless of the influence of colonialism or lack of it, faces the challenge of state formation, national cohesion and democratic consolidation. The other key challenge is the model of development to be followed. All these issues are still haunting Ethiopia and the new Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed will have to figure out how to address them.

Ezekiel Gebissa (stand less and complex addicted man) and his colleagues, in a captivating title, contested terrain: *The Oromo and Ethiopian Studies*, have laid a foundation for radical discourse on identity politics in the context of Ethiopian studies that commenced in the 1950s. Truth be told, when Eritrea got independence from Ethiopia (some would say this is regrettable), there has been some real or imagined threat of disintegration under the banner of self-determination by other ethno national groups. There is a question of dissenting scholarship amidst hegemonic and dominating discourse. And with it comes a related issue of democratizing intellectual discourse. There is much talk about widening democratic space in Ethiopia, but a precondition

for political participation is free exchange of ideas and opinions, including dissent. Free and democratic discourse should be able to candidly address issues such as: history, conquest, resistance, land question, political consciousness, nationalism, diaspora, human rights and national reconciliation. Struggles for expression and participation as demonstrated by Ethiopian student movements, have been an essential ingredient in Ethiopia's recurring revolutions. One can even coin an aphorism that "All history of hitherto existing societies is a history of struggles for expression and participation." If you suppress expression and participation, you attract a revolution.

Right at the heart of the juridical framework that holds the Ethiopian state together, one can detect some inherent contradictions, that if not well handled can lead to serious political challenges that can threaten national cohesion. For instance, article 39 of Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) of December 1994 states: "Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession." If such a provision is made in a country that has over 80 ethnic communities that are loosely brought together, while they have unique identities and histories, it can increase the appetite for secession, especially when economic benefits are not equitably distributed in the country. The same article also provides for equal recognition of all languages but kept Amharic as the working language of the Federal government. What happened is that each state was left free to choose its working language. Those who carefully observe the country have noticed that as other ethnic communities emphasize their own language, fluency in Amharic diminishes. This can easily undermine national cohesion and unity in the long run.

Still looking inside, the enigmatic polity of Ethiopia, the national question has remained defiant. Merera Gudina argues that the underlying issue undermining democracy in Ethiopia is an autocratic and authoritarian culture that can be traced to ancient monarchical style of rule, consolidated by the Derg Military regime, and further reinforced by ethnic federalism that was adopted by the 1994 constitution. Merera Gudina was rather prophetic in identifying ethnic rivalry and tensions engendered by an ill-conceived decentralization policy: "The ruling party's decentralization drive carries in itself the tendency of heightening the competing ethnic nationalisms which have further provoked intra- and inter-élite rivalry across the board."

We may have to look to philosophy and political economy for some sort of working synthesis to make sense of the Ethiopian enigma. One scholar who has tried to subject Ethiopia to a philosophical inquiry from a historical and political perspective is Professor Messay Kebede. It is quite interesting that Messay Kebede sites the conviction that Ethiopians have being the elect of God (theme of manifest destiny), and further suggests that Ethiopians consider ancient borders of Ethiopia to extend to "...Egypt in the north, Kenya and Uganda in the South, and Yemen across the Red Sea." Two problems of Ethiopia that many scholars agree about are: "the weakness of political unity and the persistence of ethnic loyalties—by the geographical configuration." In concluding his study, Messay Kebede calls for a modernization that entails celebrating ethnic and religious diversity, and that cherishes the values of mutual respect and tolerance of the other.

Diverse and Complex Polity: Towards a Political-Economic Unity:



The empirical evidence and some conceptual elements so far discussed can provide us with a foundation for a preface of political and economic theory of the enigmatic polity called Ethiopia. The complex diversity that has marked Ethiopia for millennia will not go away any time soon. It is a reality to be contended with. Any politician or political collective that aspires to govern Ethiopia will have to grapple with this phenomenon. A mishandling of this reality, as history has shown, will inevitably lead to regime collapse. Ethiopia has an old social, religious, economic, legal and political framework that has stood the test of time. It is deeply imbedded in the psyche of the ordinary people regardless of intellectual or economic status. Just as an example from legal studies, Aberra Jembere wrote a scholarly work on Ethiopia's legal history—An Introduction to the Legal History of Ethiopia 1434-1974, in 2012. No country in Africa has such a long history of documented legal practice and indigenous jurisprudence. All the major ethnic communities have their customary laws from time immemorial: Tigray, Amhara, Oromo, Kunama, Gurage, Afar, Somali, Gedeo, Sidama, Silti, Shinasha Wolaita, Kafecho, and Anuak, to name a few. The other sources of Ethiopian modern law are religious edicts and the teachings of scholars—Judaism and Christianity, Islam, and teaching of scholars. Also recall the Fetha Negest—The Law of the Kings—that was introduced to Ethiopia from Coptic Egypt.

Bearing in mind the social, cultural, economic, religious and political history of Ethiopia, the Charter of 1991 and the 1995 constitution arrived at a synthesis that settled for federalism, as the most viable form of political organization that ensure unity in diversity, self-rule, inclusivity, participation, without one ethnic community dominating the others, at least in theory. The theory behind a federal arrangement that has over two hundred years been adopted by about a third of the world's countries is that, it is the only best option for governing conflict-prone multi-ethnic societies. Power is balanced between federal government and states, with neither taking away power nor authority granted by the constitution. The best and sure way to have a stable and prosperous polity that is prone to conflict is to put in place a political arrangement that guarantees equitable distribution of power and resources. This is what federalism tries to do. But care has to be taken that such a federal arrangement is indeed decentralizing power and services, and not just in name or on paper. If this federal arrangement is ethicized, it will also tend to lead to fragmentation and ethnic exclusion. Those who have observed Ethiopia keenly suspect that the recent upheavals that took the country by storm for about three years (2007-2010), are a result of ethnic federalism—a distortion of an otherwise noble political theory, whose main goal is to decongest political power from the center and to limit any propensity to authoritarianism and monopoly of economic and political power by any one group.

The other key element of Ethiopian theoretical synthesis is the role of Ethiopia in global political and the African continental integration dynamics. Right from the time of Emperor Hiale Selassie up to the regime of Meles Zenawi (a little-dictator man from North), Ethiopia has enjoyed a robust international relations status globally. Meles Zenawi continued the diplomatic charm offensive and place Ethiopia at the center of Western interests in Africa but still kept his philosophy of a developmental state model and revolutionary democracy. Whether he succeeded in his effort, the jury is out there. But the double-digit economic growth, infrastructure development across Ethiopia and the road to industrialization that Ethiopia has embarked on, are all attributed

to Meles Zenawi's astute economic and political policies. But he also blamed for heavy handedness in dealing with religion, opposition forces and independent media.

Be it soft power such as the appeal of Ethiopia's Coffee, colorful attire, religious festivities that attract millions every year, world heritage sites, or hard power of economic influence in the region such as the Ethiopian Airlines that hovers over the skies in all directions of the world, and contribution to peace-keeping operations in distressed countries of Africa such as Somalia and South Sudan, Ethiopia is a force to contend with. Ethiopia is home the AU and every year, AU Summits are held in Addis Ababa, coming up with fantastic and at times over ambitious plans such as Agenda 2063 and Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA). Ethiopia can therefore be considered the synthesis of the aspirations and dreams of the African continent. After all Ethiopia is the cradle of humanity—and of origins.

Two other scholars who have helped shed some more light on the Ethiopian mystery, and who has to some extent contributed to the synthesis discussed in this section, are Gérard Prunier and Ficquet in their co-edited Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi, that we just cited above. All the strands of the Ethiopian mystery fall into place—monarchy and territorial expansion, demography, economics, politics, international relations, culture, religion (Islam, Evangelical movement, and Orthodox), pan-Africanism, Eritrean question, democracy and development, electoral politics (2005-2010), urbanization, and former regimes. The editors assembled a team of experts on different aspects of Ethiopia of today. The result is an unprecedented scholarly work.

What else then do we know? We shall touch on a few salient features of the Ethiopian mystery as a gradual introduction to the events that gave rise to Dr. Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Federalism and revolutionary democracy have been the operating political theory since 1991, with its main dynamics of decentralization, democratization, and liberalization. This arrangement has persisted for over 27 years but with political tensions ever rising. It is these political tensions that reached a crescendo and became uncontrollable leading to Prime Minister Hailemariam's resignation in 2018.

Religion demography which has been a major factor in Ethiopia's social, economic and political life has undergone some radical shift. By 2012 Ethiopia's population reached 91.2 million, being the second largest in Africa following Nigeria. The infrastructural transformations by way of excellent road networks, and air travel, has increased the country's cohesion but have also facilitated easy mobilization of the population for political activism. The three major religions Christianity, Islam, and Judaism continue to live side by side. The major religious shift in religion has been the rise in numbers of evangelical protestants (close to 20 %) and Muslem (close to 33 %), when combined, displacing Christian Orthodox Tewahedo Church of Ethiopia as the dominant religious framework for understanding Ethiopia. While the Catholic Church is still the minority (about 0.8 %), it far outranks others in terms of social services provision such as schools, humanitarian projects and hospitals. Islam is now accorded equal rights under the secular constitution even though once in a while you hear of veiled comments about unsubstantiated links with Islamic fundamentalist groups. The most dramatic and colorful group among the various religions of Ethiopia that has gained currency are the various protestant movements. Gérard Prunier and Ficquet characterize them aptly: "By their assertiveness, capacity for



entrepreneurship, discourse against traditional beliefs and conduct, and use of the resources they get from their transnational networks, the various Protestant movements have become one of the major forces contributing to the birth of a “new Ethiopian man”, in accordance with the developmental stance of the government.” While Prunier and Ficquet express some concern that such radical transformation may have potential destabilizing consequences that are often overlooked, their potential to be agents of democratization has also been overlooked.

What about bread and butter issues or political economy and elections? There much talk of Ethiopia as an “African Lion”, given its rapid economic growth (at 11.6 % in 2007/8.) Ethiopia has also adopted a climate resilient green economy covering both agriculture and forestry. There is the much talked about Growth and Transformation Plan. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is talk of the town and it is on course even though Egypt keeps making some trouble about this grand project. Skyscrapers are all over the Capital of Addis Ababa for all to see, Clothes factories have been opened, Chinese investments has grown by leaps and bounds. Ethiopia has also embarked on an ambitious industrialization plan, that is home-grown, using its model of the developmental state. Areas that Ethiopia has embarked on include: agro-processing, light industries, industrial zones, textiles, infrastructure, energy-centered investment, floriculture, and import substitution.

However the major question to raise about the rapid economic growth is its largely state controlled nature and concentrating all major investments in parastatals that in the words of Gérard Prunier and Ficquet, “...throttles the capacity of private investors to enter Ethiopia’s market.” Sectors such as telecommunications and finance are no-go areas, since they are the exclusive reserve of the state. One does not need to be an expert in economics to see that such an arrangement will lead to shortage of foreign currency, promotes rent-seeking and corruption, distorts the economy, and limits the growth of the private sector, that the government also admits in rhetoric, is the engine of growth.

Electoral politics is probably the most contested area of Ethiopia’s long march to democratization. If the 2005 and 2010 elections are anything to go by, then it seems the political playing field is not level. This is an area that needs some thorough thinking. Broadening political space and allowing health competition is the way to go. Along with this widening political space comes freedom of expression and association. Ethiopia should be commended for subjecting itself to NEPAD’s Africa’s Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), that aims at improving good governance and supporting socio-economic development in the continent. While introducing the 2011 NEPAD’s APRM Report for Ethiopia the then Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said: “In a relatively short period of two decades, Ethiopia has successfully shifted from a unitary state to a federal system, established a fledgling democracy, and achieved a relatively high economic growth rate.” Among the commendable practices that Ethiopia was praised for include: overhauling and developing road networks, assertiveness on self-reliant planning, pro-poor expenditure patterns of the governmental budget, with emphasis on agriculture, food security, irrigation, primary education, and health, and sanitation, Ethiopian Commodity Exchange, microfinance, access to markets, and strong micro-economic policy, that have yielded broad-based economic growth. The challenges or areas of improvement that NEPAD highlighted are: relations with Eritrea, democracy, governance and building the

private sector.

NEPAD’s APRM of 2011, came up with quite instructive and useful recommendations for Ethiopia. Few of them will suffice. On the federal system, the major criticism is that it has tended to “...essentialize” ethnic identities, “privileging” them over other identity types and, in the process, heightening ethnic tension and conflict.” At the same time Ethiopia’s federalism is praised as “...refreshing approach to governance,” and that “...it emphasises the positively creative, crosscutting, utilitarian value of ethnicity for democracy and development.”

Key issues to be addressed if Ethiopia is to be a vibrant modern democracy with its brand of development theory. First, addressing regional inequalities especially in education and public services. Second, addressing the challenges of capacity at the wereda and kebele levels and fix corruption and inefficiency. Third, respect the principle of decentralization that informs federal arrangement and avoid the top-down governance that can lead to intolerance of dissenting views. This also entails separating party from government. Fourth, strengthening and democratizing oversight institutions such as National Election Board, The Human Rights Commission, the Ombudsman, the Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission. These agencies need to be accorded some independence for them to be effective. Fifth, a political culture that allows for rule of law, separation of powers, independence of the Judiciary, Legislature and Executive arms of government, allowing competitive electoral politics and a strong civil society. Sixth, political pluralism and political tolerance. Working for common ground and unity among all the political actors is the way to go.

While addressing the issue of mass protests and riots as the “new normal” in Africa, Tana Forum 2018 zeroed down on Ethiopia and analyzed what caused the mass protests in 2017. The Forum’s findings are on target. The protests that erupted in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and South Africa in 2017 were considered to be caused by a combination of both political and economic factors: “Across the three countries, a varying combination of issues such as poor governance, assault on civil liberties, poor social service delivery, poverty, issues of land rights, corruption, brutality by security forces and political inequality triggered mass protests.” With specific reference to Ethiopia, the remote causes of the mass protests and riots were what NEPAD has hinted at, and these are: tensions between the federal government and federal units; failure to manage diverse groups; instigated rivalries between and among ethnic nationalities; lack of inclusion, political inequality, and unequal distribution of social and economic opportunities.

The State of Emergency that was declared in August 2016 only provided some respite to the protest and disruptions. The issues were much deeper. The second state of emergency was declared, but this also just reduced the tensions for a while. Important to note how ICT and social media played a key role in mobilizing protesters both at home and in the diaspora by use of Twitter, Facebook, Whats app and others. Restricting and shutting down internet helped a bit to reduce the protests, but only for a while. The anger and frustration had reached a climax already. These are the circumstances that led to the rise of Dr. Abiy on the political scene.

Ruling Party: Challenges and Prospects Ahead:

After some detailed discussion of Ethiopia, it is now time to turn to the man himself (Abiy), who has taken over the mantle to



govern the enigmatic polity of Ethiopia. Both the global and local media have spent quite some time analyzing and prescribing solutions for Ethiopia's new Prime Minister. He has a job well cut out for him and the expectations are quite high, and he is rating is also high. Fortune did an opinion poll and 59.49 % of Ethiopian support him, while 39.66 % are indifferent, and 0.84 are against him. The mood in the country is that of cautious optimism, waiting to see if the rhetoric and euphoria will turn into genuine democratic and economic reforms.

The ruling party head started off with a charm offensive visiting the massive country of Ethiopia, spreading good-will, assuring the population and preaching unity. This is clearly a good start given that the country had become polarized and was on the verge of collapse. Calm has been restored. He has started by projecting himself as a statesman and a unifier. He has already made official state visits to Kenya and Djibouti.

The challenges that Dr. Abiy will face in years ahead are still the same as his predecessors have faced. Ethiopia still has issues of rising inflation, unbalanced terms of trade, Forex crunch, great expectations from impatient youth and masses of poor people, unequal distribution of wealth and development. The private sector is still in its nascent stage and he will have to make radical steps to turn this challenge around.

The challenge of national cohesion and unity will be around for some time. A lot of effort to heal and reconcile the entire country will be needed. It might even be necessary to organize some sort of Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission so as to bring to a closure the past wounds and hurts that have kept the country in a state of suspicion of a likely return to the dark past days.

At the level of regional politics, Egypt will continue to complain about the use of the waters of the Nile, so the prime minister and his ruling party will have to continue rallying the Nile Basin countries to pile pressure on Egypt to be fair its demands with regard to the Nile waters. This might also entail Ethiopia getting more aggressive in joining regional blocks such as the East African Community, COMESA, and above all acting in a way that will give confidence the rest of Africa that Ethiopia is indeed the champion of Pan-Africanism. Issues such as visa on arrival for all African countries as some have done (Rwanda, Ghana, and Kenya). The newly formed AFCFTA is an opportunity for Dr. Abiy to show leadership in encouraging other African countries to expedite the ratification and implementation of this game changer.

Opportunities and prospects abound. The ruling party can take advantage of the new mood and enthusiasm in the country and rally the citizens, donors and development partners to work for new dawn in Ethiopia. Both the region and the international community will be willing and eager to invest massively in a country of over 100 million people that is of great strategic location. But the caveat is that they should be assured that the internet will keep working, the telecoms will be reliable, and the private property will be secure. All these possible but they require political will and some rethinking of the statist economic model and highly centralized planning model that leaves little room for the private sector.

The most important resource that Ethiopia has is its human resource—people. Ethiopians in generally patriotic, law-abiding, courteous, almost superstitiously God-fearing, proudly Ethiopian—all these until provoked by unscrupulous politicians. The Ethiopian population is by and large youthful with almost 60% being youth below the age of 35. When we hear of

demographic dividend as an engine for economic growth, it is in Ethiopia where this demographic dividend can be harvested. The equally youthful new Prime Minister needs to warm up to the youth and engage in a structured conversation with them and listen to what they want or what they can contribute to their society.

Addis Ababa, the capital City is home to key think tanks and policy hubs of the continent—UNECA, AU, IPSS, IGAD. These are great opportunities. One does not need to invent the wheel when it comes to complex policy issues on climate change, security, industrialization, governance, social and economic transformation, urbanization, ICT, innovation and financing for development. All these issues have been researched and documented by the named agencies.

Conclusion:

I tried to present a cursory look at an enigmatic polity called Ethiopia. We call it a preface to social, political and economic theory of Ethiopia from the Queen of Sheba to Dr. Abiy Ahmed. Those hearing about Ethiopia for the first time will learn one or two things about this polity that defies definition and easy conceptualization. And for those who have made a profession studying Ethiopia, few more questions may be formulated. For us (the Ethiopians), it may be an opportunity to wonder and say: “We never thought of ourselves this way!”

Ethiopia has great potential and its new ruling party and Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed has come at the right time when the country needs fresh insights to propel the country into the middle-income level by 2025. The key elements for this economic take off are there. But the political dynamics and economic policy bottlenecks need to be addressed. Some of these challenges have been addressed in these pages. The prospects have also been explored.

In the broader framework of “Africa rising narrative”, Ethiopia offers a paradigm of what the rest of Africa can become, with some coordinated efforts and resilience. For the investors who are looking for where to put their money, strike while the iron is hot. Ethiopia, more than ever before, is ripe for massive foreign direct investment. It will be a regional economic hub in the not so distant future. To bless this new mood, even the little-known regional body of Catholic Bishops of Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern and Africa (AMECEA) will be having their 19th Plenary Assembly from July 13th to July 23, 2018, Addis Ababa. While this might on the surface look like a small religious event, it has a positive impact in boosting the image of Ethiopia on the global scene. The Catholic Church has a following of over 1.2 billion members and still counting. Even if a small section of this large constituency gathers, the impact is felt world-wide. This event will also help to boost Ethiopia's tourism industry, especially sacred tourism, in which for historical reasons, it has comparative advantage.

If Ethiopia can fix its social, economic and political challenges, it will provide a paradigm for the rest of the continent. Ethiopia is a land of vibrant diversity, but it needs to promote equal dignity and peaceful unity, inspired by the cultural and religious values that mark Ethiopia.

These qualities form a foundation for social capital that is a key to development. In a way the current ruling party head (Abiy) embodies these qualities. If he continues on the current trajectory, there is no reason why he will not join the rest of distinguished



leaders that have gone before him (their limitations notwithstanding). May the words of the Psalmist come true: “Ethiopia shall lift up its hands in prayer to God”, to celebrate the economic and political prosperity for all, but also to embrace divergent views and opinions.

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