

Back To Ethiopia With Love

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It was in the early hours of Sunday morning that I arrived in Addis Ababa after 8 hours flight from London. It took me almost 2 hours to obtain the required visa before I got out of the airport building. The main reason for such long delay inside the terminal was a large number of people arriving home for Easter holiday and the inadequate number of staff (only two personnel) available on the day to issue the entry visa for the entire passengers. It was therefore very frustrating to queue up for long time after such a long tiring flight. Once I walked out of the building and met my families and friends, however, I forgot about the unpleasant long queue, the hassle and the tiredness associated with my journey.

There were many people at the waiting area and I saw tears streaming down on many faces when they met their beloved once. I was moved by this endearing culture of ours where as Ethiopians, we always send and receive family members and friends with tears, affectionate kisses and hugs. Although we leave home for various reasons, we are always attached to our beloved country and follow what is going on. We are not discouraged to love our country because of the indignities and calamities caused by brutal dictators. We remain proud of our ancient heritage and bask in the glory of our great and famous people such as St. Yared, Emperor Amde-Tsion, Emperor Theodoros II, Emperor Menelik II, Abune Peteros, Ras Abebe Aregay, Prime minster Aklilu Habete Wolde, Kebede Michael, Laureate Tsegaye G/Medhin, Abebe Bekila etc.

I went back to Ethiopia first time in 2001. As for the country, my impression was everything and nothing has changed since I left home. Then after a couple of weeks into my vacation, there was student riot and I was perturbed and gutted by the way the regime brutally dealt with it. I returned to Europe and did not therefore go back until last year. However, this time a decade later the first thing that I witnessed was how the capital city, Addis Ababa was materially changed and it was still growing bigger by the day. There are a number of newly established areas, roads and the city is over-crowded with the natives and foreigners. I was told that most of the changes came about after the 2005 election crisis. During my short vacation, I have learnt a lot about the political situation, the cost of living and the changes Addis Ababa was going through. Upon my return last May, I wrote my observations and shared it with my family, relatives and friends. The feedback was positive and I was encouraged and advised to publish it online. Since I wrote this short article, some interesting developments have taken place in Ethiopia mainly the absence of the prime minster from the political arena. The explanations given at press conferences with regard to his whereabouts are all ridiculously implausible and puzzling, although various sources indicate that he might be dead. Initially, I

was planning to wait until I could find out the prime minister's fate; then modify the article accordingly and publish it but later I thought my article could stray away from my original intention. Therefore, I decided to publish the original article which is a simple observation rather than a critical analysis of the political situation in Ethiopia.

Addis Ababa and its dwellers

The Ethiopian capital city Addis Ababa which was founded during Emperor Menelik's reign has been transformed into a major city in the past decades. It has grown steadily in terms of buildings, roads and also the size of its inhabitants. Currently, there are lots of building and road constructions everywhere and part of the plan is to gradually to replace all the wattle and daub houses by concrete/story buildings at least in the city centre but public parks and children play grounds are very minimal or non-existent in the city. Once the current constructions are completed, it is expected that Addis Ababa will be a very beautiful city. Yet, the fate of those people who are losing their properties or lands due to demolition is unknown whether they will in fact get a replacement or compensation according to the market value. Many have some rather contentious views on this issue. This plan or policy might leave many people destitute. Some have been offered to move into newly built condominiums. However, these new buildings range between three to seven floors with no elevator which are difficult places to dwell in for the old and disabled. Some of these buildings are already showing signs of deterioration in less than a year of completion.

There are a lot of newly built roads across the city and some of these are shoddily done and already showing deterioration and potholes. It seems there is no proper coordinated plan between the municipality and other companies such as the Ethio-Telecom and Water Services as some of these new asphalt roads have already been dug within the completion of few weeks/months. When these roads are dug, there is no any kind of barrier or sign which says road-work in progress or indicating there is a hole; as a result many people and even cars fall into these holes specially in darkness. What surprising more is after completing a particular task; the workers just put back the soil into the hole and leave without properly repairing the surface of the road which makes the road muddy when it rains. Some even have left a pile of soils and rocks on the pavements which have been there for months. Basically it shows there is no sense of responsibility, accountability and proper maintenance whatsoever!

The number of foreigners and Ethiopians from abroad make Addis Ababa an exciting polyglot city. The city is full of myriads of bars and hotels in every corner and some of the hotels are really opulent. The ubiquity various small business of Khaldis coffee shops and other outlets are everywhere in the city. People are

usually sitting at coffee shops or by the side of the road and some of them are gazing pensively at no specific things and lost in thoughts. The main streets and squares are full of people who travel around and peddling their wares. There are a lot of beggars everywhere; some of whom squat around churches and on the side of streets in plastic shacks. Some of these plastic shacks were originally made as a bivouac by the people who were forced to leave war zone areas (from north of the country) almost two decades ago which is now turned into a permanent accommodation.

Our people are naturally very courteous and cultured. Even the street urchins are very respectful to the elders except the odd brats and some young people also show ignoble actions. Most people use a double entendre expression or mordent wit when they talk about politics. People actually don't say much about politics neither in public places nor in private due to the number of security forces personnel around and of course the draconian measure usually taken by them. Therefore, most people usually say "belefelefu yitefu" which the English say "he was burnt by the very fire he started" and keep quite. Despite the unpleasant experience in the country, there is nothing in the people's demeanour that suggests they are anxious but rather look bonhomie. However, I am sure their smiley faces belie their misery and suffering.

This year a few honoured people like the writers Mamo Wedeneh, Sebehat Gebre Egziabher and the great artist Afework Tekle have passed away. Actually Afework Tekle passed away while I was in Addis and watched the burial service on TV. He was buried at the Holy Trinity cathedral, as befits someone of his position. These famous people have left a legacy of literature and art behind and their work is enlightening many of us and the generation to come.

On the other hand the city is full of dilapidated old cars. Taking a taxi was the most frightful experience as I was not too sure if the breaks work in steep downhill roads. The number of traffic lights working in the city dwindled to the lowest level. No idea why they are not working or where they have disappeared. Pollution is beyond belief! The smokes of the cars, dusts and all kinds of things in the air give you discomfort when you breath. The dirtiness of the city would make an aesthete person shudder. Some of the side streets have putrid smell which makes you queasy. The frequency of power outage was less compare to my previous visit but still a major problem.

There are a number of new squares and roundabouts named after some foreigners such as Pushkin, Bob merely, etc. The actual statues have not been erected yet but only the plinth. The most heart breaking thing is that we have our own numerous heroes who did a great deal for our beloved country and those are the ones who deserve a spot for their contribution. What has Pushkin done for Ethiopia? The current generation is just

looking abroad for a model or guide in every aspect of life and worship anything foreign. Even most shops, bars and restaurants including those tacky ones do have foreign names. Some are written in English and some have English names written in Amharic alphabets which are very disappointing. This foreign addiction is not limited to the above but people are more interested in English football league than their own. I understand that there is no a descent team in the country but why on earth they fight when one of the English team they support loses? The radio and the newspapers are constantly blathering about English football. This makes me wonder whether our people have any more pride in our own heritage. Whom shall we blame for such dregs of conscience? What is the government doing? What are the intellectual and cultural elites doing?

Most of the population have a great desire to get out of the country including young elementary school children. There are numerous girls who are preying on visitors from abroad to try their luck. These beautiful girls are everywhere including in big hotels' lounge pretending they are waiting for someone or they are having a good time with their friends. Of course there are also some who seem to be on the take. They look all sugar and spice when they see a potential predator is around so it easier for him to start chatting them up. Some of these visitors might have ordinary job or a job that is as the low man on the totem pole but brag they have a very important post or pretend they are well off in order to attract these young girls. These heartless scoundrels flaunt their money and abuse lots of young girls; and that really takes the biscuit! They can be found everywhere including coffee shops or clubs at anytime of the day to take advantage of these vulnerable girls' desperate situation. Some of them are often in their inebriated states and behave like juvenile delinquents which make them a total embarrassment. Their salacious jokes and comments make them nasty twerps.

The Cost of living

The current cost of living is very high and wondered how the majority of the ordinary people manage to live with their low income. If one says it is due to the value of the ETH birr, it might be ok for imported consumer goods. However, there is no justification of high prices for domestic products. For instance at Easter the price of meat such as chicken and lamb were an eye opener experience... prices almost coming closer to what one pays in the west. The cost of drinks and meals in those plush bars and restaurants are very expensive. This might be to get rid of the riff-raff far away! However, most of the ordinary people are begrudged paying so much for most of the basic items since they lack the financial wherewithal.

People in other countries (*mainly in Europe/US since I know these countries*) can afford to buy basic or luxury stuffs they need since their earnings are relatively related to the cost of living in the country they live

in whereas in Ethiopia people with basic salary cannot afford to buy basic day to day necessities let alone luxury goods. It seems the government pays scant attention to the needs of its citizens mainly the poor. The hardship imposed on the people, the mistreatment of its citizen and the high cost of living will be the coup de grâce to the downfall of this rouge regime. Unfortunately, uprising is the inevitable corollary of such hardship imposed on society.

The growing disparity between rich and poor is beyond imagination. Some of the people who have lots of business that have brought them wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. The majority of people have a frugal lifestyle and they criticize the ostentatious lifestyle of their leaders and those who are associated with them.

The Government

In the western culture leaders are usually elected every few years depends on the country's constitution. However, in the Africa continent most are usually stay in power for a life time and are often replaced by force except in a few instances. In Ethiopia, the thousand years ancestral monarchy was overthrown by the military *Derge* which was also in turn removed by the Tigre People Liberation Front (TPLF) or known as the *woyanes*. The *woyanes* are so different from the previous leaders and they have taken the country back to the previous century. When Emperor Theodoros II ascended to the throne, one of his main aims was to end the era of the princes and re-unify Ethiopia. He was constantly on mission to the neighbouring provinces to accomplish his dream. Although he committed suicide on the fortress of Meqedela on 14th April 1868 as his dreams were thwarted but he still paved the way for reunification. The subsequent leaders let the torch of unity go on and Theodoros's vision did eventually materialise. This year, it is 144 years since Emperor Theodoros died and unlike his vision and that of the earlier and later leaders, the *woyane* has facilitated the way to new 'Era of the Princes' and the disintegration of the country. It is my fervent hope that it won't happen as this is not also the desire of the Ethiopian people.

The leadership has been accused of being involved in venal practices. Rampant corruption is in its highest level in the country's history. Some of the crass remarks made by government officials are disturbing and make you wonder whether these people have the slightest idea about our culture or administration. People accuse the government of riding roughshod over the country's law. Most people complain about courts being corrupted and miscarriages of justice. The *woyanes* have been involved in nefarious activities which have been reprobated. People continuously being arrested, put in jail and there is a paucity of information on the whereabouts of them or nobody knows when they will appear in court. Actually detention without trial, disappearance, torture and murder are common practice in Ethiopia during the previous regime and now. The

prisons condition are said to be appalling and the guards' cruelty beggars belief. Such actions are a great act of malevolence! If the current leadership possess the fear of God and respect our culture, it wouldn't have been making incendiary remarks and inflicting odious crimes against its own people. Perhaps Emperor Haile Selassie's speech in 1948 describes the current government precisely: ***“Where there is no faith in a civilization but only power, that civilization is surrounded with doubt and fear and its power expresses itself in brutality”.***

Because of security everybody is frisked at the entrance of any building when entering. Some of the guards do not have any manner whatsoever and they give you peremptory instructions what you need to do and this behaviour must be inherited from our culture living under authoritarianism. This is not limited to the guards but employees in other governmental offices including at the airport security and immigration desk too. Questioning or arguing with them can jeopardize your safety. In the past there were many scrupulous politicians well known for altruism who stand for the rights of the citizens and they ensured that government money was spent properly; however, in these days people in charge of certain offices will do anything in order to accumulate wealth. What I noticed also, like so many politicians or others in power, most ordinary people also have insatiable desire for power so that they can benefit from the system too. When are we going to find a veracious and conscientious leader who put first the country and the well being of the people? The definition of power in Ethiopia is an opportunity to embezzle and expropriate public fund; to receive bribes and abuse helpless people whereas in the West it is to serve the people. People justify such atrocious behaviour by quoting our adage *“sishom yalbela sishar yikochewal”* which could be rendered in English as *“he who did not benefit when promoted, would regret when demoted.”* ***It seems nepotism and malfeasances are a well accepted practice in the country.*** It clearly shows that there is a vast leadership chasm between Ethiopia and the Western culture.

Road blockage is not unusual for the residents of Addis Ababa whenever the prime minister is ventured out of his den which can last hours. Just a few hours before he is passing by, pandemonium reigned on the road thanks to the federal police. The police usually jostling and shoving the pedestrian to go to the side streets or into buildings and any cars parked on the streets are checked. Why does one live in such fear? Where are the affection and immunity surrounding and protecting the 'beloved' progressive leader? I pray to see that day whereby a leader is elected by the people who is not scared to go out and mingle with his/her citizens and not constantly guarded by the army/special forces. I will be very happy to die after I witness my wish like Simeon who said *“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation..... (Luke 2:29).”*

The government has proscribed any websites or newspaper that criticize the leadership and as a result many websites have been blocked and could not be accessed in Ethiopia. However, the media in Ethiopia constantly excoriates the leadership and the people in the higher authority in a sarcastic way and sometimes boldly and directly. Some are taking risks on what they do and these individuals should be admired and acknowledged for their courage.

Religion

Religion is something that is taken seriously by the people and most Ethiopians are very religious people in their respective denominations. A large number of people flock into the churches every day. Most of the churches in Europe have been closed due to lack of attendants whereas in Ethiopia lots of new churches and mosques are being built. The number of people at a special procession or feast day is in thousands. In the evenings most churches are open for evening prayers and sermons and a lot of people attend this on daily basis. I hardly heard any modern music on the streets or taxis but only spiritual songs until Teddy Afro's new CD "Tikur Sew" came out. I am really surprised to see the even more growing religious tendency in our country and wondering what has triggered this. Is it because the people utterly despondent about their life and do not see a brighter future and seek God's intervention to free them from their misery?

The current generation of the Orthodox followers are very conservative and traditionalist thanks to *Mahebere Kidusan*. These young people undermine the church fathers/leaders and challenging not only the leadership but they think they know better than them which is a bit of a concern. Some time it is hard to blame them totally when one see the statue of the patriarch and his picture hanging in the compound of most churches. In the old good days or ancient time most church fathers were being abstemious; however, these days the clergies' life style and the conduct of their duties are not according to the scriptures/The Law of Kings (*Fitha Negest*). Because of their life style and not looking after their flocks, some of these sanctimonious clergies have lost respect from the ordinary people. This is a usual trend seen from the top to lower hierarchy. While the head of the church has a lavish life style, there are numerous churches being closed; lots of clergies do not have a proper salary to support their families and many Christians murdered by some fanatic Muslim elements.

Beside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the different denominations such as Pentecostal and Protestants are also working hard to convert many to their groups and their numbers are increasing. There are a number of new worship halls in the city. I see also a large number of mosques sprang in strategic areas of the city. I see

more men with long beard and women covered from top to toe. So in general religious radicalism is in the rise. There have been a number of incidents whereby Christians have been murdered by some fanatic Muslims while attending church services in *Jimma* and in other parts of the country; however, it seems the government condones such atrocities which indirectly encourage these thugs trading under the name of Islam to continue their barbaric act. After learning more about the relationship between Muslims and Christians, I have a sudden premonition of what the future might bring. Unless the various faith groups work together to encourage society to live side by side peacefully, it will have a serious repercussion. The religious tension in some parts of the country makes it a tinderbox ready to ignite.

Conclusion

The country I love so much “Ethiopia” has progressed in the past decades in terms of infrastructure and developments. Despite the inimical policies and cumbersome bureaucracy, hundreds of new small businesses have spawned across the country. The government could have achieved more but the investment procedures and application’s process are serious impediments to attract investors. There are still a lot of hurdles to be surmounted before an effective procedure is in place.

Ethiopia is well known for its human right violation and currently ranked top of the list. I am hoping all the injustice, fiendish act of wickedness and the very mediocre ethnic mentality will perish from our land and all people live respecting each other and see the bigger picture of greater Ethiopia than their villages and ethnicity. I pray the current myopic government which uses the obsolete ethnic banner shall come to its senses and change its policy so that people are assigned to various posts based on their qualifications rather than ethnic background or political affiliation. The damage has already been done and it will take many more years to uproot the politics of the cult of ethnicity and restore Ethiopianism. Our resplendent monarchs and patriots have fought and repelled all the invaders/colonizers for **“one glorious Ethiopia” while sacrificing their precious lives.** They paid high prices so that the generations to come would live in peace and rightly be proud of their heritage.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church which is known as the unifying factor has also played a significant role for the independence of our country and integrity of the various ethnic groups. The church also intervened in the past when leaders abuse their power and her citizens’ rights were violated. However, the past four decades her role and power has diminished and she has given a blind-eye to the abuse caused by the leaders. Beside her previous political involvement, the church was the mainstay of the literature and music culture for our country. This ancient church has been a target of invaders and colonialists including

fanatic Muslim elements. The orthodox Christians and other religious groups have lived in relatively perfect amity for many centuries; however, I've gnawing doubts about religious hatred and conflict in the provinces. I am hoping the tension will wane and people will continue to live together in peace and harmony as it has been for centuries.

Our past and recent history show that our people are very pious, humble, hard working, kind, respectful and they deserve better. They are very forgiving and benevolent. For instance, during the Second World war, they pardoned the Italian POWs who murdered them and did all kinds of inhumanities after Emperor Haile Selassie delivered a speech (which is known as “the golden speech”) the day he entered Addis Ababa. Secondly, when the bandits (*woyane*) approached Addis Ababa, *Dergue* was not in control of the cities. At that time, the people did not go after those who committed the most gruesome crime during the 'Red terror', though those criminals were living next door. The current leadership has been ruling the country with iron fist for over twenty years now while not showing much respect to its citizens. There were occasions that the leaders of the regime made humiliating and offensive public and private remarks particularly directed against a section of the population they politically categorised as traditional oppressor. However; our wise and characteristically patient people were not put out by these rash and irresponsible mischaracterizations and they were willing to ignore these, let bygones be bygones for the sake peace and ethnic harmony in the land. Indeed, during EPRDFs time, the nation is held together by the sagacity and togetherness of the people but not by the much flaunted ethnic policy and widespread practice of ethnic favouritism of the regime. The Ethiopian people are teaching their own government the art of being Ethiopian and the politics of peaceful coexistence among the different groupings in the country. It should heed to this wisdom and sense of fairness of our people. By jettisoning its 'revolutionary democracy' dogma on the one hand and doing away with its unfair ethnic favouritism, on the other, the regime should be able to create a good will amongst its people and prove to be a responsible and just government in the interest of its own survival. Otherwise, its obstinate refusal to 'change' may bring the same fate that has already fallen the regimes of Ghadafi and Mubarak.

Despite all the unpleasant things happening in our country, one can, as a visitor, enjoy one's stay in Ethiopia if one can manage to deflect ones thoughts from the suffering of the poor people and their dire situation. In the class divided city, the people visible in day time and evenings are of different social extractions. During the day, Addis is a city of hustle and bustle and therefore you may not discern much of the divide. In the evening, however, Addis looks completely another city, the type of people in clubs or restaurants are different in very many ways. Yet, it is heart breaking to see the number of girls lined up in the streets of Addis once it is dark. I am sure these girls are not just prostitutes but the challenge of life must have forced

them out to make a living. You also think of the high number of girls going to the Arab countries to work. Does the government, in any way, follow up the well being of its citizens in the country they live in and work? I doubt that specially when I hear the kind of incidents affecting our sisters in Lebanon and other places this year. Many of our hard working people who try to make a living in many of the Middle Eastern Arab countries tell poignant accounts about the mistreatment, hardship and tragedy they experience in these places on a daily basis. The political situation and economic burden have forced our people to suffer in all aspects of life. One might say it is their choice but it is a matter of survival otherwise if things were promising or fair in our country, they do not go through such hardship.

In general, my short stay in Addis Ababa was absolutely fantastic. I am very glad that I went there and spent a few weeks with my family and I have no words to express my heartfelt delight except saying simply the best! However, when I think about my country, my moods vacillate between hope and despair and start wondering where is the God of Ethiopia to wipe the tears of His people and assuage their grief? We Ethiopians regularly pray and attend church services unlike the rich western society but our suffering seems endless. What have we done to be punished like this and for so long? When is it going to end?

I hope the God of our forefathers will look after our country with His love, kindness, boundless blessings and forgive us of whatever sins we have committed wittingly or unwittingly. I pray that He will in his divine goodness allow us to prosper, live in peace and happiness. I hope and pray that the day will come when most of our people will have three meals a day, live without fear and build a great nation whose generations to come shall inherit a just, fair, rich and powerful land.

May our Lord keep the integrity of Ethiopia and frustrate and foil the schemes of those who are waiting to see the interment of our beloved country.

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