

Quo Vadis Ethiopia? (Ethiopia Wodet?)

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye

PART V (Continued from Part IV)

As we have just seen in the brief assessment, hereinabove, of each ethno-region's feasibility to secede and its viability to become an independent state, Ethiopians for now may breathe a sigh of relief that their fear of the country's dissolution on the basis of the current ethnic configuration is unrealizable or at least unlikely. Despite the acutely worrisome developments we now see in some parts of the country and the overall adverse domestic, regional and international conditions, and the importunate demands of the political ethno-elite that are poised to threaten our peace, stability, unity and the country's territorial integrity as a whole, we saw that under the prevailing circumstances none of the existing nine component ethno-regions has any real, plausible and practical chance at either seceding or especially becoming a viable independent entity. Neither would that be desirable to the country as a whole and primarily to the population of each region.

But can we really take that for granted and be at ease? May be not. Not so long as Ethiopians are subjected to tyrannical rule and continue to be denied of their democratic and human rights, and if democratic, unity and patriotic forces remain divided, do not take the potential dangers very seriously and act accordingly. I believe that, as a society and as individuals, the worst shock would come when and if we do not have the psychological readiness for all eventualities and if we, when and where possible, are not ready to avoid them altogether, or at least stay alert to minimize ensuing damages. If we fail to understand the potential dangers and act resolutely and in unison, there is more than a good chance, at least in theory and under certain conditions that moves towards secession by certain groups in some of these ethno-regions could possibly materialize. Therefore, regardless of the overall assessment that showed the improbability of secession, there are certain credible and compelling reasons that Ethiopians should be wary of the serious secessionist threats and challenges coming from regions like the Ethiopian Somali State, for example. Hence, we cannot afford to be complacent or lower our guard and vigilance against those dangers.

We know that countries go through several changes and different phases. Some enlarge and some shrink in size and change their shapes, some change their names. Iran was Persia before 1935, most countries especially in east Europe changed names and configurations, several times over. Bismarck's Germany as well as Hitler's gobbled up many European and many nation-states were divided-up; some to come back with different configurations or

under different names, and some totally disappeared. Almost all African countries got their current boundaries by colonizers sitting in the comfort of their offices in Europe and without due regard to the people whose fate was arbitrarily decided including splitting families. Stalin calculatedly sowed the seeds of ethnic strife and planted time bombs by reorganizing population groups in "Soviet Socialist Republics" where some ethnic groups purposely and dubiously were made to dominate others. He reconfigured the new "Soviet Socialist Republics" that did not exist before in the manner and shape he made them to be. Like what TPLF leaders did, Stalin's new "republics" were given ethnic identities with arbitrary boundaries, like the "Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic" or the "Uzbekistan Soviet Socialist Republic", etc. People in those places lived for centuries without necessarily identifying themselves by ethnicity as they were mixed with Turks, Iranians, Mongols, etc. Ethnicity before Stalin meant little to nothing especially in the political sense to Uzbeks or Kazakhs. Some may argue that if Kazakhstan with 131 nationalities can become an independent state with an ethnic identification of the dominant group, why not; say the Oromo or the Amara? My answer to such arguments is in a question form; well if that is the case, i.e., if Kazakhs can live as an entity with that many nationalities within it, what reason would there be for the Oromo or the Amara not to live with the other language/ethnic groups within a democratic Ethiopia?

In our context, would Amara be denied of their rights and freedoms simply because they lived in different provinces or regions and the area (region) they live in is not designated as an Amara region? Vanity of ethnic pride aside, would the Oromo or the Amara have a better chance of having their freedoms and rights respected simply because the region they live in is designated as Oromo or Amara region respectively? Were Tgreans enjoying better life and their rights and freedoms respected better than other Ethiopians simply because they happened to live in a region called Tgrai? I do not think so.

Ethiopia has changed both its internal configurations many times over and its overall size. We do not have some of the larger regions that existed at one time; Angot used to be as large as a province but presently is condemned to the size of a sub-district in Lasta, the same is true to Yifat or Dewaro or Fetegar or Damot, etc. At times, in the process of internal migration and assimilation even large population groups like the Inarya, for example, lost their identities all together.

At any rate, Ethiopia survived as a country and remained united, albeit with varying sizes and shapes, not because of an accident of history or, as some ethno-elite may argue, as a result of collusion of her leaders with foreign powers but despite them. Whether people like it or not, Ethiopia was a country and is to be.

Some may wrongly believe that secessionist and anti-unity forces are the problem of the government of the day alone and not theirs. And that kind of careless attitude is caused mainly by lack of understanding of the very nature of those organizations, and in part by the overwhelmingly unbearable concerns people have about EPRDF-induced daily survival issues that overshadow the serious dangers the country and we as a people face. However, we should not allow any amount of problem to override the real and fundamental dangers those organizations and the consequential foreign influences behind them pose to peace, stability and security of our people and the unity of the country, the ripple effect they could cause.

We also need to understand that we cannot prevent secession simply because we think situations are not conducive or all factors are counterintuitive and not favorable for that to take place, or that we have "good relations" with certain individuals in those movements; as if those persons, not the very principle and the ideology their movements stand for, are what matter and determine the outcome. Neither should we be forgetful of the fact that efforts at secession may not need the consent or agreement of the whole or the majority of the people in the area in question nor would it take the mobilization of all the people. In fact, given the very nature of the ideology of secession based on ethnicity, just like race or religion-based ones, it only takes few determined souls for such movements to get a good foothold and grow by leaps and bounds and to be in a position to seriously threaten the security, stability and eventually the unity of the country. True, they can at least be more than a nuisance to the regime of the day. But they can also blur the struggle of democratic forces, and can create fertile grounds for foreign intervention to be more than a possibility.

The undesirability of and the counter intuitiveness of the situation for secession or the infeasibility of becoming a viable independent entity notwithstanding, some groups with strong organizational capacity, determined, effective and cohesive leadership and solid foreign support could still succeed at seceding from the country, or at least create more havoc to cause the overall weakening of the country that would open the flood gates of chaos. Situations for that to happen could be especially conducive under the prevailing environment if appropriate and decisive measures are not taken. The first decisive measure by democratic and unity forces would be a solid and principled political stance on secession; along with a resolute determination to form a unified platform whose tenets are unity and democracy. (I'll present my suggestion on the issue in a separate piece).

Nonetheless, there are several reasons that both protagonists - Ethiopians as a people and patriotic and democratic forces as a group on one hand and secessionist elements or groups on the other - should know.

A). The following points need to be recognized by Ethiopian unity and democratic forces, and the Ethiopian people at large:

First, patriotic and democratic Ethiopians and the Ethiopian people at large should clearly recognize and seriously take into account that under the prevailing local (national), regional and international conditions our country's unity, unfortunately, is not sacrosanct and inviolable as almost all of us had believed or some among us may still believe. Currently, Ethiopia as a country and Ethiopians as a people have several vulnerabilities and there are so many factors, from foreign influences to absence of democracy that create fertile grounds that entice and encourage any group to espouse a secessionist agenda, and as I mentioned earlier some objective realities may even enable certain areas to make a serious attempt at secession.

Unfortunately for Ethiopia, for the first time in our history, we have leaders at the helm of governmental power whose credentials on strong Ethiopian nationalism, rightly or wrongly, are suspect and questionable, and Ethiopia and Ethiopians do not yet have a strong and credible national alternative democratic force.

What is awfully strange is that, in a vain effort at garnering the support of secessionist and anti-unity groups purportedly to topple the current regime, some Ethiopian organizations are in cahoots with those forces. Those Ethiopian organizations do engage in that endeavor knowing too well about the stated objectives of those secessionist forces in question partly because of a twisted logic that such anti-unity groups truly "represent" ethnic/language groups or regions simply because they claim so, or because they misread the very ideology of these groups or they are simply shortsighted. No matter what the reason behind such ill-considered political stances may be, complacency and passive attitudes and underestimating anti-unity forces ought to stop if we want and really mean democracy for all and if we seriously value the unity of our country. I am not against establishing or having any contacts with those groups, but am of the opinion that relations with anti-unity and secessionist forces should not be the priority, let alone the preoccupation of democratic and unity forces at all. Doing so only undercuts the viability of democratic and unity forces while at the same time strengthens secessionist and anti-unity groups. I believe that more than anything else, maybe only second to its ineffectiveness and inability to get its act together to function as a unified national alternative force, the one fatal mistake that would keep it in a state of despair and that would bring the democratic and unity camp to heel is its lack of a firm and unequivocal

position on secession and its passive support to secessionist groups. Democratic and unity forces ought to be as consistent, bold and firm on unity and democracy as anti-unity and secessionist forces are on their positions.

Many compatriots, including those who ardently oppose secession exhibit lenient attitudes towards secessionist movements simply because they happen to be opposed to the current regime. Such incomprehensibly naive attitudes may partly be caused by a genuinely overwhelming anger at the current regime and the absolute hate some compatriots have for it; a hate that, I am afraid, seems to be going far beyond the regime's leaders and their wrong-headed policies. Unfortunately, what concerns me personally is that beneath the surface of that expressed hate there seems to be a growing trend and a subdued strong ethnic-based sectarian feeling that is wrongly and unjustifiably directed against the people of Tgrai; similar to what some groups had (some still have) against the Amara. Some suspect that this is partly the basis for the unprincipled cooperation and cozy relations between certain Ethiopian groups who claim to stand for unity and groups with secessionist agendas. There is no denying that there could be other valid reasons for such relations between the two groups that I consider to be unprincipled, shortsighted and to some extent deviant. The main reason behind that could also be lack of clear understanding of the idea of secession from an ideological angle and the inability to distinguish between the possible short-term or tactical benefits and the long-term or strategic adverse consequences of such relations. It could also be, I guess, as a result of a simple but basic confusion some may have between the badly needed cooperation among the opposition on one hand, and who that cooperation should be with, what the end game for that cooperation is and the strategic consequences of that cooperation on the other.

Whatever the reasons might be, such unprincipled and harmful co-operations between the two strategically incompatible sides are vitiated by basic misconception of the very ideological and philosophical differences each one stands for. Although this type of superficial cooperation could yield **badly needed strategic benefits to secessionist and anti-unity groups**, it is as **self-deceiving as it is consequential and unnecessarily injurious to the causes and the very principles** that democratic and unity forces stand for.

Yes, cooperation among the opposition is very important, indeed essential. But among whom and for what strategic purpose should that cooperation be is the question. For democratic and patriotic forces cooperation among the various opposition organizations is, and should be, national in scope and something that is based on unity of purpose and for a common strategic objective; a purpose and a strategic objective that put the interests of Ethiopia and its people above and beyond anything else.

I know how some compatriots may easily misunderstand what I am saying or could have misgivings about it. To make myself once again clear, I am not adamantly opposed to every organization that stands for group rights per se, as most are a natural and justifiable response to tyrannical systems that neglect or out-rightly suppress and oppress group of people for simply who they are. Although fighting against injustices perpetrated on any group of Ethiopians and fighting for their rights is the primary task of any Ethiopian democratic organization, sections of the population that feel compelled to organize for the purpose of human and democratic rights without demands for cessation can not be condemned wholesale but should be understood and embraced. But what we need to be cautious about and be aware of such groups is their elastic nature; as ethnic-based political movements are almost always led by the ethno-elite whose interests are mostly fluid and their objectives prone to inconsistencies, the chance for such organizations taking a different direction in due course is more than a probability.

Simply put, what I am calling for is a reexamination of our alignment of forces, particularly as regards to cooperation among the opposition. As far as cooperation among organizations in the opposition camp is concerned, organizations that should be considered for any **meaningful and fruitful** cooperation (in addition to unity and democratic forces) are groups whose movements are aimed at freeing or liberating themselves (the group) from **tyrannical systems** and who are **fighting for democratic rights** and whose **ultimate objective is a democratic and united Ethiopia**, and not those whose declared intent is to **'free or liberate'** themselves (the group and area) **from Ethiopia, the country**; where Ethiopia and Ethiopianness are the target.

Understandably some may argue that with or without having any kind of relations with secessionist anti-unity groups, democratic and unity forces have no cohesion among themselves and do not seem to be eager to work together, therefore taking a firm position on secession and secessionist and anti-unity groups could not alter the equation. True, currently there is no unity of purpose even among those democratic and unity organizations whose declared programs are almost identical. But the question is one of principle and strategy. There should be, even in politics, a red line of cardinal principles that should not be crossed. The unity of the country and democracy are such positions of cardinal principle. Secondly, from this firm principle emanates strategy. Lack of firm principled position on our country's unity and a demonstrable commitment to it, and propelled by political expediency and tactical exigencies had led some Ethiopian groups to associate themselves with and lend their support to secessionist and anti-unity groups. That faux pas leads to wrong and unworkable alignment of forces, which in turn incapacitates the opposition.

Questioning what the necessity of or the very fundamental reasons for cooperating with anti-unity and secessionist forces should not be taken as a declaration of war on them. Not necessarily. I say not necessarily because, unless it is a question of timing, I, as an Ethiopian, do not see why reciprocation would be considered wrong. The reason for that is simple. The moment a group declares its intentions to secede, it should be clear that that group has in effect disavowed Ethiopian identity and Ethiopianess and declared war on the country and its people. Obviously that declared intent is also directed at democratic and unity forces as they are part and parcel of the people. Simply because such groups are opposed to the government of the day alone does not necessarily make them our allies; or conversely, because we are opposed to the same government they are opposed to can not make us immune from their declared intent that sees us as a target. The reasons for and the nature of our opposition to the regime and theirs are as different as day and night. Therefore, in principle, I see no reason why I should be expected to, at least, associate myself with such forces. What I am, therefore, calling for is a serious reexamination of how we relate with these forces and who we associate with. I can feel how this can rack some nerves. But I welcome any genuine disagreement, as that could be based on a misconception that would and could encourage and provoke further honest discussions. And there is nothing more enlightening and constructive than having open, honest and straight forward discussions on this and other vital and relevant issues of national import.

Besides, I believe in paradigm shift whenever necessary, and this is one extremely important and principal area where we in the democratic and unity camp badly need to have and make if we are serious and really want to address the issue of democracy and unity. And the timing cannot be any better. I also understand how some may be surprised to hear that from me as I strongly support and have consistently pushed for not only cooperation among the opposition but their unity. Just like during the time of Dergue, the opposition whose cooperation and unity I am calling for, however, is the ones that oppose EPRDF's undemocratic and tyrannical rule and its divisive **system**; it is those who oppose this system not those who oppose the country or the very tenets of its unity that I am talking about.

{I only wish we in the democratic alternative could get used to calling ourselves the 'National Alternative Democratic Forces - NADF' and not 'the opposition', which is reactive by its nature. That, in fact, was the reason behind why 'The Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia – CAFPDE', in short Alternative Forces (አማራጭ ኃይሎች) was formed at the end of the Ghion Conference}.

Therefore, unless I failed to make myself clear, what I have been, and am, for is a cooperation among the opposition based on our common strategic

interests whose departing and arrival points are one and the same; a unified and democratized Ethiopia. It is from that perspective that I have a problem with any cooperation for cooperation's sake that is so often guided by political expediency and lacking in strategic and long-term objectives. Let us be clear; these two groups have two fundamentally **different philosophies and opposing end games**. The dilemma for some may be that not cooperating with ethno-nationalist secessionist groups could be wrongly interpreted as a rejection of the language/ethnic groups these organizations claim to represent and/or the unjustifiable fear that doing so could be seen as a "chauvinistic" approach that 'fails to understand and recognize' the injustices "their" people were subjected to. If I allow myself to ally with or to accept secessionist ideas or their representative organizations for fear of not being labeled "chauvinist" or just to comport myself with "the reality on the ground", as some say, would not I be betraying the ideals of Ethiopianess and unity for which countless gallant patriots and fêted heroes from different areas of the country sacrificed for; or am I telling Abdissa Aga or Abdissa Ayana, Fitsum Birhan Abraha or Abai Abraha, Regassa Jimma or Mekonnen Feyissa, Jagama Kello or Geressu Duki, Birhanu Urghe or Gonssa Assaro, Ali Berki or Ali Abdurahman, and millions like them that what they proudly stood and sacrificed for was in vain and wrong? They obviously were not and neither am I. Are those heroes for whom we owe our unity and values chauvinists too?

This bogus propaganda is one of the psychological campaign points and unfair characterizations that such groups have tried to inculcate in the minds of Ethiopian democrats, and an intimidating tactics that has so far worked for them. I dare say that Ethiopian democratic forces, including progressive groups, have succumbed to the relentless propaganda of political ethno-nationalists. It seems to me that they (democratic forces) have allowed themselves to be captive of an irrational and self-imposed lopsided intimidation that has continued to dissuade them from pushing bold Ethiopian nationalist agendas. Self-appointed ethnic "representatives", some having fewer members and following among "their people" than that are found in some multi-national organizations, have been allowed to unreasonably hold the collective struggle for equality, justice and unity hostage. This should not be allowed to continue.

Who gave the exclusive right to, say ONLF for example, to fight injustices inflicted on **our** people of the region by tyrannical regimes and systems that knew no bounds? Are other Ethiopian organizations and the Ethiopian people at large not concerned about the plight of their compatriots in that region? What role do these organizations, albeit in the name of "freeing" or "liberating" "their" people, have in causing more havoc, mayhem and hardship on the local population? How can Ethiopian democratic and unity

forces abdicate their solemn obligation to fight for the rights of the people of the region and consign the struggle to ONLF? I see no reason for doing that.

Dear compatriots, if we find any Ethiopian, no matter which region he/she comes from or which language/ethnic group he/she belongs to or whatever faith he/she adheres to, who is not as equally concerned about the suffering of any individual Ethiopian or any language/ethnic group anywhere in the country, or who is not ready to fight for their rights as anyone from that particular area (region) would do, well that person is either the perpetrator of or an accomplice to the injustices inflicted on the people or dare not call him/herself Ethiopian. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said in his famed 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' on April 16, 1963, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere", let alone in one's own country. As for me, as long as I call myself Ethiopian, I am as equally concerned about the rights and wellbeing of any individual or group in Ethiopia, and am equally ready to fight for their rights as anyone who wants to have an exclusive claim over. This is not only my right but also my solemn obligation, lest I become an accomplice, and should dare not call myself an Ethiopian and a democrat. One does not even need to be an Ethiopian to fight injustices perpetrated on any human being anywhere. In fact anyone deserving to be called a human being ought to be concerned about and fight against injustices on fellow humans anywhere.

Some may argue and try to justify the "usefulness" and "correctness" of cooperating and forming alliances with known anti-unity and secessionist forces, believing that this would yield in having a tactical advantage to the opposition and could enable it to remove the regime of Meles Zenawi. I find that kind of argument to be frivolous, simplistic, wrong-headed and one based on an assessment that is inherently devoid of strategic thinking.

Do we understand what strategic differences those groups have with TPLF/EPRDF? What problems did ONLF have with the current regime for it to resort to taking up arms? Was their difference over human rights and democracy? Of course not! So, if such groups have a problem with EPRDF, a force accused by many, including those that cuddle with these groups in question, of lacking in strong Ethiopian nationalism, what is it that would make them acceptable to Ethiopian democratic and unity forces? Again, I know some will say 'it is only tactical', and some even boldly assert that it is 'necessary and a must do' for the opposition 'to defeat Woyanne'. Good grief! This is a bogus assertion that emanates either from lack of self-confidence or total ineptness. What is tactical about it? Tactical friendships or alliances work with tactical enemies, not with whom one has a strategic incompatibility or outright fundamental differences of strategic goals. I see cooperation of democratic and unity forces with anti-unity groups as a pact of

'conflict in waiting' or 'conflict by appointment' – a pact with the devil -, because by the end of the day conflict between the two is inevitable. But by then it could be too late to react, as those forces would be in a better position at the expense of democratic and unity forces and any reaction then would be utterly passive and useless. Had that been possible, TPLF would have worked closely with EDU and EPRDP at least to remove the Dergue.

Dear compatriots, we should know that tactics emanate from strategies and strategies determine tactics employed, but wrong tactics could undermine or even derail the best strategies. What common lasting and strategic interests are there between democratic and unity forces and secessionist and anti-unity groups? There is no strategic communality or compatibility between the two interests; one is the antithesis of the other. Then what are the strategic exigencies that necessitate the democratic and unity forces to cooperate with secessionist groups? This dismal shortcoming to understand the nature of alignment of forces that ought to be on ideological bases and failure to weigh the strategic implications had led some to waste time and energy on searching to form illusive and losing alliances with groups that have totally different agendas and opposing end games.

As I have said repeatedly before, many of the ethnic-based organizations are there because of the undemocratic and repressive policies of successive regimes, including the current one. TPLF, OLF, etc., did not come out of the blue. They are the fruits of tyranny and a response to the realities of the day. So were EPRP, MEISON, EDU, etc.

Therefore, as long as tyranny and oppression exist, there will continue to be more of them. The solution lies in eliminating the very causes and sources that force people to take up arms. But eliminating the causes and sources of injustice cannot be done piecemeal and can be tackled better and more effectively in a national movement that transcends region, religion or ethnicity. Some may take what I am saying out of context and find it to be contradictory. But there is none. Understanding the reasons that led for TPLF or OLF to come to being and stating that the solution lies in eliminating the very reasons and causes for such organizations to be formed in the first place are not contradictory. As long as people feel oppressed and are denied their basic rights, fighting the way they can is not only understandable but justifiable. The question lies in what form the struggle against injustices and for a better future takes. I see no reason, for example, why TPLF was needed when EPRP and EDU were in Tgrai fighting against injustices and for a better collective future. Both organizations had countless sons and daughters of Tgrai in their ranks at all levels, from top leadership down. Initially at least, each organization had more Tgreans than TPLF had; so also were numerous progressive Oromo in EPRP and MEISON. Why

Tgrean elite wanted an exclusive ethnic club in TPLF or the Oromo elite needed OLF is arguable.

Ethnic organizations in essence are as discriminatory as race or religion-based organizations are. The need for forming an organization exclusively on ethnic basis belies the very essence of fighting for individual freedoms and equality; as these organizations have an organizing principle of 'collectivized' outlook that sees people in an ethnic prism that focuses on differences among people and not necessarily systems. As such, they are not only restrictive as membership is based not only on ethnic identity but also acceptance of their very ideology. Such groups see everyone else who calls him/herself Ethiopian, including people of the same ethnic background who do not ascribe to their ideology, as the enemy to their cause. In ethnic-based as well as religion or race-based armed or violent conflicts, victims include people of the same ethnic, religion or race group, who do not identify themselves as such. That was what "moderate" Tutsis in Ruanda faced at the hands of Hutus, Iraqis, Somalis, Pakistanis, Afghans, etc. "moderate" Muslims experienced and continue to experience at the hands of extremists, some "moderate" and progressive whites faced at the hands of KKK during the civil rights movement.

Some compatriots argue that collaborating and cooperating with ethno-organizations, whether they are for secession or not, is important simply because "that is the reality" on the ground. These proponents further cursorily theorize that working or collaborating with those organizations greatly undermines the regime as that is where its political support base is, and not doing so would adversely affect and further weaken democratic and unity alternative forces. To me these arguments are not based on principle but shallow political expediency. If they are meant to challenge the regime at its own political game plan, well that would not work because for this regime that is the very principle it is based on and not a simple game plan. Similarly, to those organizations, this is not a simple tactical game plan but a means to achieving a strategic objective that could be realized thanks to the willing facilitation of democratic alternative force. As to the "reality on the ground" argument, I only remind those compatriots that EPRDF as a government and its policies are realities on the ground; and the struggle is to change what has become a 'reality on the ground'. Isn't it? It is a question of cardinal principles of unity and democracy and not political expediency where flexibility is understandable and the norm. We cannot, in good conscience, fail to realize the strategic consequences of continuing to collaborate and politically associate with secessionist and anti-unity forces and expect the unity of the country or a democratic system. Doing so would be tantamount to sacrificing strategy for tactics or knowingly swallowing a poisonous pill in a vain attempt to relieve common cold and would be as foolhardy as throwing

the baby with the bath water. Let the two camps deal with their own priorities separately first and see whether there could be a meeting point down the line, but not now, not this time.

As controversial as some might find it to be, this is one of the critical areas where a paradigm shift is badly needed.

Second, there are fundamental differences between religion and ethnic-based movements and democratic and unity forces in their politics and approaches. Some may justify TPLF's success as testament to the righteousness of the organization and its leadership and the rightness of the cause of ethno-nationalism without careful and closer scrutiny for that exaggerated and highly-vaunted claim. There is no question that TPLF fighters fought gallantly, like any Ethiopian group, and sacrificed a lot and literally stuck to their guns all the way through. I do not want to take away what they rightfully deserve in any way shape or form or minimize the formidable organization TPLF had been as a fighting machine, and my argument is not against individual fighters or as a group but the very organizing principle and ideology of ethnic politics and armed movement on that basis in general.

Inflated conclusions based on uncritical examinations overlook basic reasons why and how movements on race, religion and ethno-nationalist bases are basically different from other democratic and multi-national organizations. Ethnic and religion-based movements are so narrowly defined that agitation to rally support among the population (in whose name the fight is waged) becomes sensitive, sensational, galvanizing and emotionally charged enabling any "liberation" movement to get even willful following among the local people, especially the youth, relatively easier, and compelling cooperation among the rest through coercive and harsh methods. The latter is a norm more than an exception. I remember while in Tgrai how just two TPLF combatants would come to our mass gatherings of Tgrean peasants and as we just finished our political agitation those TPLF members would just rise up read a an emotionally charged poem, usually blaming the Amara for the misery of the people of Tgrai, and sing a song or two (*Derfi*) and that was it. Although our political agitations were made by mainly the same sons and daughters of Tgrai, obviously, ours did not have the kind of agitation that had an emotional appeal and apparent resonance as theirs. Especially helpful for such forms of agitation was what the Dergue was doing to Tgrean youth in towns and cities, as it did to all Ethiopian youth in all parts of the country; and this was deftly was used by TPLF agitators who made it appear that Tgrean youth were targeted simply because they where Tgrean; end of the story.

People in areas where such armed groups operate are generally helpless as they are, on one hand, at the receiving end of the brunt of retaliatory

measures by local and central authorities and on the other, whether they like it or not, they are "supposed" to support "their liberators" through forceful and coercive methods, in addition to which is the moral compulsion they (the people) feel to assist their sons and daughters in those movements.

Third, almost all religion and ethnic-based secessionist and anti-unity forces are armed. That allows their cause to get more attention and publicity, giving them an exaggerated, over-sized and out of proportion importance in the political arena that further encourage intransigence and embolden them to be less willing than democratic and unity forces are to come to the middle. What needs to be understood is that those forces represent only a tiny fraction of the population, but because they are armed they can hold the entire population group they operate in hostage. If we examine how many active members, say TPLF or Sheabia or Khmer Rouge, or OLF or ONLF or FRELIMO, etc., had, even at the height of their peak, and what percentage of the population that represented, we find it to be miniscule. The point here is that in societies where people are not empowered, it only takes a small number of armed elements that is only a tiny fraction of the population to determine the future of the whole. Therefore, absent democracy people remain highly vulnerable to such possibilities.

Currently, democratic and unity forces of significance have little to no armed wing. (I am just contrasting the two sides here and not necessarily advocating that unity forces need to be armed, although it is within their right to fight tyrannical rule that does not allow peaceful political dissent; there are even times where that may be necessary and even the only way to dislodge it from power).

I am not condemning every person who is in those movements. It is not. It is not necessarily with the people who involve in such movements I have a problem with. Frankly, it is the most dedicated and truly selfless people that one finds in these movements. I admire their commitment to their cause on individual basis and as I mentioned earlier, standing for group rights cannot be condemned wholesome either. The problem is in the very ideology of separation that involves down to splitting families, and the narrow outlook that fails to see people as humans first and one that focuses more on assumed or real differences among groups of people rather than as citizens of a country that have a lot in common. If we focused only on what differences each one of us has with one another every individual would stand alone and no families or communities would ever exist.

The most important point for the human race as a whole and for people of a country is how able they are to understand differences that exist and not only accept them but respect and celebrate them, and know and determine to live

with them. This, of course does not mean that one should accept oppression and subjugation and live in humiliation. Absolutely not! No Ethiopian can consider him/herself free unless every one of us is free as individuals and groups within our larger Ethiopian community. Therefore, a specially armed group to "free" only certain sectors of our society should not be seen as the only option. It should, and is, everybody's business to stand for our collective freedoms; and we can do it. Ethiopians in EPRP, MEISON, EDU, Hibrehizb, Kinijit, etc., each in its own way, showed us not only its possibility but also its beauty, as it frees individuals from the ugly vestiges of backward sectarian views; backwardly views that lead individuals to hate "other" compatriots simply because "they are not like them", be it on ethnic or religion grounds.

Organizing on multi-ethnic or country-wide basis transcending region, religion and ethnicity epitomizes collective greatness as it brings out the best in people, where there is no generalized group of people to categorize as the enemy, "the Amara, the Oromo, the Tegar, etc.", but systems. Unity symbolizes strength and beauty. How rewarding and magnificent it is to stand together for the common good in a non-religious and non-ethnic manner! And our country is there because of the immense sacrifices made by its people of all regions, religions and ethnic backgrounds. Ethiopians of all stripes paid the ultimate sacrifice not exclusively for a locality or a certain area or certain language/ethnic group but for everyone calling him/herself Ethiopian and a country called Ethiopia. .

Fourth, unlike mass movements for human or democratic rights, for example, the very nature and ideology of movements that are based on race, religion and political ethnicity have easier motivational appeal, and exercise an overwhelming psychological influence and control on their members and followers that they make a hardened and more determined fighters out of each one of them who would be eager to sacrifice for their cause. Such fervent commitment to cause and readiness to sacrifice is only matched by the zeal of patriotic people that are ready to defend their country against foreign aggressors (invaders) or those defending the territorial integrity of their country or ideologically motivated persons. This, however, does not in any way mean that people in non-religious or political-ethnicity-based causes are less committed to their cause or less courageous. Absolutely not; it is only meant to show how the very ideology of political-ethnicity and religion-based (like left and right-wing extremist groups) organizations mold their members with a different mindset than members of democratic forces.

Members of religion and political-ethnicity-based as well as extreme leftist or race-based organizations see the system and the persons they fight against as real enemies in the strictest sense of the term that should have to be

destroyed and annihilated. There is no grey area. They see things in black and white. They take it personally and believe that they are fighting for survival. They do not recognize the rights of others, including those persons with the same region, ethnic background or religious faith who do not ascribe to or identify with their narrowly defined agendas. For an ethnocentric secessionist, that area only belongs to him and to him and his ethnic group alone and anyone else will have to leave and disappear no matter what. That very mindset was what led to TPLF leaders' decision to wage war against EDU and EPRP. For TPLF leaders Tgrai was only for TPLF and negated the fact that other Ethiopians also had the obligation to fight against injustices and for the freedoms and rights of all Ethiopians including the people of Tgrai. That kind of mindset is basically what causes ethnic cleansing and what leads to genocide. God forbid what TPLF leaders would have done if Tgrai did not happen to be more or less homogenous. Thus, the former are molded into becoming singularly-focused, easily radicalized, emotionally charged and nihilistic souls who have less latitude to think outside the box and are ready to adhere to a rigid interpretation of their cause. That, in essence is what Dr. Negasso crystallized in his message of wisdom when he officially dissociated himself from ethnic politics and declared his membership in Aendnet.

On the other hand, for members of democratic and unity forces, including most members of the central government and the Armed Forces, the anti-unity and secessionist groups they fight against are "misguided fellow citizens" that have to be subdued into accepting to live together or have to be punished and vanquished; always operating with a mindset that reconciliation between them is more than a possibility. In fact that is the operating mindset and goal. They operate in the earnest belief that they fight for the whole and against certain "misled and misleading" elements and groups, whereas for secessionist groups the reverse is true; that everyone else is against them and what they consider "theirs" has to be cleansed of "outsiders". Even in the Eritrean case the war that lasted for three decades was seen differently. For Ethiopians it was a civil war, but for ELF/EPLF it was a "liberation" and "anti-colonial" war. Ethiopians always referred to the war against insurgents as war for the unity of the country and against secessionists, and at times as against 'Arab hirelings' and not as a war against Eritreans, whereas ELF/EPLF referred to the opposing side in the government as "Ethiopian occupiers", "Amara colonizers", etc. Thence the mindset on each side was quite different and so were the approaches and the responses.

Such pervasive and corrosive are race, religion and political-ethnic-based ideologies that whoever is not like them or does not believe like they do is the enemy that has to be done away with. Just look into all secessionist groups'

web-sites, the mantra is "getting rid of" and "expelling those outsiders" from this or that place if "they heed "their warning "before it is too late" or "face" extermination. In contrast, unionist and democratic forces always speak of "coming together", extending a standing invitation to 'compatriots on the other side' to "come and join" them. Two quite different breeds indeed!

Fifth, because secessionist forces especially the ones based on ethnicity and religion are much easier to be used as instruments of foreign powers to implement their (the foreign powers') specific agendas in the country, garnering foreign support for such ethnic and religion-based secessionist forces is relatively easier and in our (Ethiopia's) case in abundance. Foreign support for those forces is mainly based on anti-Ethiopian sentiments and aimed at undermining and destabilizing the country or at promoting and pushing their influence, and not necessarily in support of what each group aspires to be getting by the end of the day. We have seen how secessionist forces were, at one time or another, the darling of neighboring countries like the Sudan and Somalia; Arab countries like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Saudi Arabia, and even democratic nations like the US and UK, obviously for different purposes. That is what we are witnessing ones again at the moment, be it the support being rendered to such forces by Sheabia or other foreign powers whose inherent motive is anti-Ethiopian, especially its unity. The fact that most, if not all, democratic and unity forces are not disposed of being used as instruments of a destabilizing force, foreign support for them is minimal at best. Even unionist and democratic forces that bear arms may not get the same "favorable treatment" as the ethnic-based ones.

Sixth, as I said before, no one should doubt that some of the anti-government movements that eventually evolved to become secessionist movements came into being as a direct result of repression, unfair treatment, neglect and denial of freedoms of citizens or group of people by the central government that failed to understand the problems and was unable to quickly and appropriately address their grievances in a prompt, peaceful and democratic manner. In due course, however, more oppression and suppression ensue as a result of retaliatory measures taken by central authorities which in many cases are, unfortunately, non-discriminatory. In some cases the initial trigger points would be exploited by various foreign interests that add fuel to the fire and further aggravate the situation and escalate tension; thus altering the nature of the problem into growing to be a violent secessionist movement. That was the case in Eritrea where primarily Egypt and later other Arab countries wasted no time to jump into aiding and abating ELF and later EPLF to become an anti-Ethiopian guerrilla movement. The same was the case in Bale where genuine grievances of the local people were exploited by Somali irredentists.

Therefore, we should be cognizant of the fact that legitimate grievances trigger most of those movements, and as long as people's concerns are not addressed properly, the chance for such problems becoming a national issue that threaten the unity of the country is real. And as such we should not paint every movement with broad brush of being anti-unity or blindly condemn it without critically examining the history behind it and closely studying if there is any possibility of resolving the issue through dialogue. By the same token we should not be naive enough to quickly and without closer scrutiny embrace those movements, especially the ones that have a stated objective of secession without any preconditions simply because they happen to fight against the current government. It should be clear that ultimately the problem such groups have is more with Ethiopia, the country, than the government of the day. That is what many people fail to understand. This very issue was the sticking point and the difficulty UEDF had with Shebia-orchestrated and sponsored Utrecht meeting that produced the so called Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD).

Arguably, Ethiopian patriotic and democratic forces are not as well organized and collectively determined, and as unified and focused as each of the anti-unity or secessionist groups. That is more a reflection of the fundamental differences in the ideology and organizing principles between the two sides than anything else. This inherent difference notwithstanding, I dare say that in the current Ethiopian body politics, we in the opposition camp are our worst enemies. This sad state of affairs of the opposition block which is still unable to be a credible alternative force that could formidably and decisively challenge EPRDF, is the first line of obstacles to the realization of our collective aspirations. It is in our vested interest to clearly understand and realize this riddle, and to soberly assess, seriously address and decisively rectify without delay. In view of the dangers arrayed against the unity of our country and the serious obstacles to the realization of our collective desire to have a democratic system of government, I find it incomprehensible and maddening to see less effort being made by, and the lackluster desire of organizations in the opposition camp to urgently respond to this conundrum.

The sheer number of democratic forces and the way and manner in which they operate make the very cause of unity of the country and the struggle for a democratic system that each one of them preaches about so eloquently and feverishly meaningless and impossible to achieve. This is a sad reality that ought to change if we really want to save the unity of the country, desire to change the status quo and wish to have a democratic order in our country. Ethiopia can only depend on its sons and daughters – its people at large, and the democratic and patriotic forces - to safeguard its unity and to foster equality and justice for all citizens and for a democratic and representative system of government to take root and flourish in our country. In the last

part of this paper, I tried to answer what role current members of EPRDF could and should play in this regard.

Seventh, the strength of any secessionist force is derived as much from the passive support it gets from unity forces (beside the inherent weaknesses of the regime) as from its own overall organizational capacity and ability to operate and function effectively. That correlation is not necessarily planned or coordinated; it comes in the form of or as a result of lack of active opposition to secessionist forces or what they stand for on the part of patriotic and democratic forces. Generally speaking, democratic and patriotic forces for far too long have been timid, to say the least, towards secessionist and anti-unity forces for various reasons. One of the reasons, of course, has its roots in a distorted and misconstrued unqualified relic belief that 'all nationality questions are democratic', and the other comes from a convoluted "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" belief and a dogmatically practiced approach that vainly seeks the possible cooperation from those forces to oppose the "common enemy". But the fact of the matter is that such laxities and unprincipled approaches towards secessionist forces are not reciprocated in good faith, and frankly could not be expected as the two positions are fundamentally and diametrically opposed to each other in principle. It is, therefore, foolhardy to be wasting valuable time and energy on trying to find temporary cooperation to cause permanent damage. I find it to be as foolish an act as willfully lending one's baton now to be whipped with at a later time; and the whipping could be mortal.

The other aspect where such movements greatly benefit is from acts caused by flawed strategic plans of democratic forces that may be aimed at undermining central authority. Such poor, shortsighted and irresponsible planning could be highly consequential as it provides vitally important support, albeit inadvertent, not only for secessionist forces but also to foreign powers that may wish to harm the nation. We cannot, for example, cooperate with strategic enemies of the nation or carryout operations that hurt the nation and its people more than it does the regime of the day, like handing over sensitive information or documents about the country. I had serious arguments in the Sudan with a couple of defectors from Dergue (one of them from the Air Force) who, forgetting that they defected from the regime and not from the country itself, tried to divulge unnecessary intelligence to Sudanese authorities. That could have been an innocent misjudgment on their part, but still very wrong.

At one time soon after EDU was formed three of its top leaders were asked by Sudanese authorities to damage and severe Limalimo in exchange for getting the military materiel and weapons they had requested. The late General Nega Tegene had the integrity, fortitude and foresight to reject the request

right there on the spot. He knew too well what the consequences of doing so would be on the country and who the direct and indirect beneficiaries were. I am happy to recount here that, similar to the EDU, we in Ethiopian National Democratic Front (Ager-Wodad) were asked by Sudanese authorities to take military action against certain targets that we, to their chagrin, automatically rejected, despite the fact that they were ready to give us the aid we had requested.

Democratic and unity forces ought to have the foresight and ability to distinguish between what targets are against the government and which ones are out of bounds as they are national in their scope and utility. For example, no democratic and unity force could target to damage a dam or demolish the obelisks in Axum or the rock hewn churches in Lalibella or a similar vital national asset in order to inflict harm on the government of the day. Doing otherwise would be reckless and irresponsible or even treasonous. Similarly, no unity or democratic force could ever be impartial to, let alone condone, foreign aggression of the country simply because we happen to oppose the government of the day. But secessionist forces not only welcome such foreign transgressions but they fight on the side of the aggressors as was the case with Western Somali Liberation Front and Oromo Abbo groups. The reason is simple; Ethiopia for them is the enemy. Can one expect anything different from, for example, ONLF or Sidama Liberation Front?

Eighth, in the current political spectrum, democratic and unity forces lack firm stand on ethnic politics. In our eagerness to be tolerant, some among us in the democratic forces may have gone overboard. Political placation on the part of Ethiopian nationalists, patriots and democratic forces permeate our politics vis-à-vis secessionists and ethno-nationalists. In many instances some Ethiopians seem to see only what they wish those forces would become and at times speak on their behalf and try to project what those groups (organizations) themselves have not said or have no intention of saying or would not say. Regardless of questioning their very divisive ideology and not what they say, any statement, be it for political expediency or otherwise, coming from those organizations that states anything about standing together with other opposition groups is naively taken or even celebrated as an indication of how they are "changing" for the better. How desperate can we be? Many compatriots seem to fail to see what exactly those organizations stand for. In all seriousness, can we equate 'tolerance' or 'democratic' or 'unity' with ethno-nationalism? Do they go together? Do we conceptualize the differences that exist between the two? Can Ethiopian democrats and patriots continue to see their secessionist brethren as compatriots without supporting their agendas and vice versa?

Continues in Part VI