

# Ethiopian fascinations with the Arab Spring

*Aklog Birara\**



Part one identified similarities and differences between the Egyptian and Tunisian popular revolutions on the one hand and conditions for a similar uprising in Ethiopia on the other hand. Contrasts aside, the Ethiopian admiration for, and interest in the Arab Spring is relentless. Ethiopia's democratic and nationalist leaning elites, the majority of whom live scattered around the globe as part of country's 2 million relatively well-to-do Diaspora, spend time debating contrasts among North African and Middle Eastern revolutions and their relevance to Ethiopia. Recurrent themes that resonate with Ethiopians include political repression, human rights violations and suppression of civil liberties. As well as 60 percent youth unemployment, escalating prices of staples including foods, gaping inequality, corruption, nepotism and ethnic-based discrimination. There is data based perception that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF and its ethnic-based Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) ) that governs the country uses political capture to enrich its core members and supporters instead of serving the entire population.

Ethiopians agree that the Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni regimes are among the most repressive in the world. Given his prominent role in African politics and in the African Union, Colonel Gaddafi is more familiar to Ethiopians than President Assad of Syria and President Saleh of Yemen. Colonel Gaddafi has been in power for 41 years. Meles Zenawi, the Ethiopian Prime Minister has been in power for more than 20 years. Their battle cries of **“we are all Libyans, Syrians and Yemenis and we are not afraid”** appeal to Ethiopians. Ethnic, sectarian and ideological conflicts are pronounced in Libya, Syria and Yemen as they are in Ethiopia. For example, President Assad's regime is accused of representing a religious minority of the Alawite consisting 12 percent of the population in a country that is 70 percent Sunni. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's TPLF represents 6 percent of the Ethiopian population of 90 million. More than 90 percent of the top commanders of Ethiopia's defense and security forces are represented by this minority ethnic group. Democratic activists in Syria contend that President Assad's government supports the business elite who are beneficiaries of his regime. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is accused of favoring new wealthy urban and Tigrean elite. In both, access to wealth and wealth-making assets is dependent on loyalty to the government.

In Libya, Syria and Yemen opposition groups tried to debunk Gaddafi's, Assad's and Saleh's divisive ethnic and sectarian policies. Success is slower and longer compared to that in Egypt and Tunisia. Sizes and sheer determination of opposition groups seem to indicate that the vast majority of their respective populations want freedom and democracy. In Libya, the few who benefit from the Gaddafi regime and his ethnic group stand on his side. This reality and the security and military organization as well as defense equipment amassed over decades enables him to wage war against his own population. A commentator said that Gaddafi and his core supporters and political base “own the city of Tripoli.” Libya's wealthiest and most powerful families live there. Out of fear or self interest or both, this social base seems to “side with him”. Because it is heavily vested in the regime, it seems to disregard that the country is in a state of siege and that Libyans are killing Libyans. Gaddafi feels that a prolonged war is an indicator of legitimacy. He seems to be clueless that at least half of the country is up in arms against his regime; that he is accused of “crimes against humanity;” and that most of the global community wants to see regime change.

One will find numerous similarities between Libya under Gaddafi and Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi. The TPLF core leaders succeeded in recruiting and incentivizing cadres from different ethnic groups using ethnic and party loyalty. Purges are conducted through periodic political assessments (*in Amharic, gimigema*). Assessments serve as management tools to get rid-off individuals who are suspect and to bring in others into the fold. While Addis Ababa may not be “owned” by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, there is ample documentary evidence that shows that “Mekele and the rest of Tigray - the ethnic home of the TPLF - are owned by his party. Libya comes closer to Ethiopia than the Egyptian and Tunisian cases.

Both systems are founded on ethnic and sectarian loyalty from which wealth, assets and influence are acquired. In Libya, ethnic, sectarian and class divisions have taken toll on the society and on the uprising. Initially, the international community did not live up to the expectations of the democratic forces in Libya, Syria and Yemen. The community may have felt that “division” would bring a failed state. In part, it may be the Libyan oil factor; and in the case of Yemen, the so-called Al-Qaida factor. What Ethiopians learn from these experiences is that the democratic path in each country will be different, with one caveat. In the case of Ethiopia, ethnic and sectarian divisions are potentially explosive.

## **The nature of democratic change**

Success of any uprising in a country the size and complexity of Ethiopia would depend entirely on active engagement of millions of ordinary Ethiopians from all ethnic and other persuasions. Democratic change must involve all ethnic, religious, social and demographic groups **over a sustained period of time**. In Libya, those who are vested in the current system feel “threatened” by the democratic upheaval. Those unhappy with the system continue to sacrifice their lives and comforts. The international community resolved that it won’t allow a senseless and careless dictator to “slaughter his own people”. NATO strikes against Gaddafi’s forces would not have been politically and strategically feasible if it were not for the valiant positions of the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Libyan opposition. It would have sent the wrong signal if Western democracies did not respond to these regionally orchestrated demands by the Arab world. It would have affected the democratic momentum sweeping the region. Here, I want to inject my own intellectual assessment of the new human rights doctrine that would have been unimaginable in the 20th or in the first decade of this century. The UN system never anticipated the kind of sweeping events in North Africa and the Middle East. My sense is that international relations won’t be the same again. A new world is being shaped by new civil forces such as youth and the middle class who demand to be heard and want access to economic and social opportunities consistently bestowed upon those who capture political power and assume economic hegemony.

## **An emerging doctrine: “The response to protect”**

Horrible ethnic genocide in Rwanda taught the world community a cardinal lesson of man’s inhumanity to man. The UN and major powers kept silent only to grasp the magnitude and implications later. Retrospectively, the UN recognized that its credibility will depend on averting all forms of genocide including those perpetrated by cruel and repressive regimes against their own people. This is how the doctrine of “The response to protect” emerged. It is this doctrine that the UN Security Council applied in Libya. It will be harder for the UN and major Western powers to cherry pick dictators who should be removed. The question for those who support uprisings for democracy is the extent to which this unprecedented principle on behalf of the Libyan opposition--sanctioned by the Security Council--would serve as precedent. Ethiopians seem to be excited about the prospect that a similar situation could occur in Ethiopia. My own prediction is that it will be much harder in the future not to apply the same doctrine. Intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa would, however, take sustained popular resistance. Ivory Coast and Darfur in the Sudan are reminders that neither the African Union nor the UN took meaningful stands. In Ethiopia, there must be readiness and willingness of opposition groups and civil society to form a viable transitional framework. This is the most important lesson one draws from the “Battle for Libya”.

Gaddafi does not see the fracturing of his country as a long-term liability. In this sense too, his regime mimics Ethiopia’s. Both regimes characterize dissenters as enemies. Neither one has compassion for human beings. What drives Gaddafi is staying in power irrespective of costs to the population. The same is true for the Ethiopian regime. In a boastful and arrogant

broadcast mid-March, 2011, Gaddafi announced that his defense forces including the Air Force were ready to crush the “enemy” in Benghazi. He urged the one million inhabitants of the city to come to their senses and made unreasonable demands. He said that there will be no **“mercy against those who resist.”** It is this threat against opponents that outraged the world and frightened innocent civilians. What occurred in Ethiopia in the aftermath of the 2005 elections is identical. Both use the ethnic and sectarian cards to squash opponents mercilessly. Generally, African elites do not have much respect for the African Union; because it has no teeth.

## **The Arab League and the African Union: contrasts in courage**

I believe regional institutions are important for Africans and Arabs in asserting their voices in a changing world. Equally important is the notion that African and Arab intellectuals must be heard and play the vital role of conducting research and expressing their views on matters that affect their homelands and regions. The anachronistic view that Eurocentric and Pro Western scholars should dominate the airwaves does not go with the democratic aspirations and hopes of hundreds of millions of people including educated youth and middle classes. The information revolution has democratized access to information and empowered millions to play direct roles on matters that affect their lives. The same is true for regional organizations. They can play prominent roles in resolving conflicts and in promoting democratization and greater economic integration.

For the first time in its existence, the Arab League took the unprecedented step of asking the United Nations to impose a “no fly zone” in Libya, on one of its members. This is precedent setting. When this happened, many Ethiopians wondered if the African Union would have the stamina to go against members accused of gross human rights violations. The Arab League’s announcement provided moral courage to the opposition that fought against the odds. It set-up and publicized an alternative council that performs state functions and conducts active diplomacy. These developments and the sheer determination of the opposition encouraged the world community to pay closer attention. Gaddafi’s brutality against his own people and the resolve of the ill-equipped opposition provided pro-opposition countries such as Qatar, France, the United Kingdom and the United States the diplomatic platform they needed to delegitimize Gaddafi. On March 17, 2011, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 1973 endorsing a “no fly zone.” The decision restores faith and confidence among Libyan opposition groups and others in the rest of Africa and the Middle East. What is the lesson here?

On March 19, 2011, a coalition led by the United States begun dismantling Gaddafi’s strategic military bases. In announcing implementation of the “no fly zone”, President Obama announced that this was not his first or preferred “choice.” The French, British, Italians, Spaniards, Moroccans, Saudis, Qataris and other Arab League countries joined the campaign at different levels. This, in my view, is genuinely one of the most important global initiatives in stopping massacres and in empowering freedom seeking people anywhere. The Libyan case sets a precedent that can’t be denied to others. The uprising in Libya has a better chance of success because of unprecedented steps taken by the Arab League, the United Nations Security Council and most importantly by the Libyans themselves. For Ethiopians, the lesson to draw is that there is no substitute to the principle that there is no substitute to internal work, unity of purpose and sacrifice. It is this that engenders international empathy and support.

It is true that the Ethiopian regime is brutal and governs through fear and ethnic division. It is possible that, in any uprising, thousands may die. We see brutality at play in the actions of Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, President Assad of Syria and President Saleh of Yemen. Evidence in 2005 shows that the Ethiopian regime will resort to the same tactics as Gaddafi and dictators in Syria and Yemen: apply brute force. Libya's Gaddafi's offers the prospect that the International Court of Justice in Geneva will find him and his team guilty of crimes against humanity. Ethiopians feel that the same will happen to Meles Zenawi.

There are country differences that can't be ignored. In Ethiopia, opposition groups are as divided as ever and youth do not have tools such as Internet and social media. More than 80 percent of the country's population is rural. People want change but are afraid of change. The notion of change to serve a greater cause started with activist Ethiopian youth more than a half century ago. Elite and youth led popular uprisings that changed the Imperial government. Ethiopian youth does not have the tools to stimulate change within the country compared to Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Syrians and Yemenis. Ethiopian democratic activists feel that change must come from the country's Diaspora. I do not share this view. Democratic change must come from the population within. The Diaspora can create an organic link with those who want change and provide tools, funds and policy guidance.

### **The façade of elections and the rest**

William Dobson offers a marvelous piece in the Washington Post on January 6, 2011 that captures the essence of what dictators do regardless of the country. In "**Dictatorship for Dummies**, Tunisia edition," Dobson identifies 7 of the following themes that I would like to share:

**One, "Be repressive, but don't overdo it."** Dictators do not give-up their wealth and power easily.

**Two, "Don't try to be Singapore."** Supporters of the Ethiopian government believe that rapid development occurs only under a single party developmental state that mimics Singapore, China and others. This reinforces dictatorial governance. 1/

**Three, "Give young people passports"** and to find jobs and send remittances. "If you can't get everyone a job, encourage emigration. It is the best way to get rid of educated young people who will only cause you headaches when they realize that they can't find work or must live with their parents." Ethiopia exports its educated talent and relies heavily on remittances to the tune of \$3.3 billion per year. Less competition means greater concentration of wealth, corruption, favoritism and nepotism. The face of corruption is the same whether in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Yemen or Ethiopia. 2/

**Four, "Let the opposition exist-just don't let it win."** Meles Zenawi says that a strong opposition is good for the country and wins 99.6 percent of the votes. I agree with Dobson that when faced with challenge, a dictatorial regime "faces a choice-retreat or lash out." In Ethiopia, the regime "lashes out." President Mubarak lashed out and ended in disgrace. 3/

**Five, "Give them newspapers."** Ethiopia is among the least press free countries in the world. Press is government owned and propagates propaganda. Foreign broadcasts critical of the regime are curtailed. President Obama's post-Tahrir Square pronouncement that people are entitled to fundamental rights and access to information are most encouraging for those who seek freedom including Africans. 4/

**Six, “Never negotiate with an angry mob”** reminds me of what happened in the aftermath of the 2005 elections in which hundreds of Ethiopians, mostly youth, were massacred. The regime never sought negotiation or forgiveness from the families of the victims. This leads me to Dobson’s most **seventh point.**<sup>5/</sup>

“**The people actually matter.**” Development is about people and entails effective participation. In 2010, Ethiopia received \$3.2 billion and more than \$30 billion over the past 20 years. The government failed in its lead responsibility of achieving food self sufficiency and providing jobs to millions of youth. The lives of the vast majority have not improved.

I would like to add an **eighth theme namely, ‘Justify income inequality as the price of pursuing growth.’** Income inequality in Ethiopia is more pronounced today than at any time in the country’s history. Growth benefitted the governing elite more than the poor and youth. Corruption and illicit outflow of funds are chronic; with UNDP reporting that \$8.345 billion moved out of the country illicitly over the past 18 years. This enormous outflow from one of the poorest countries in the world reminds me of the recent findings by the Bank of China in which 18,000 Chinese officials stole and moved \$123.6 billion out of the country illicitly over a period of 15 years. In the absence of checks and balances, it is easier to be corrupt and to move resources out of the country.

---

*\* By Aklog Birara, PhD, Adjunct Professor, Trinity University, Washington, DC, Senior Advisor, the World Bank, retired*

#### Notes

1. Dobson, W. “Dictatorship for dummies.” The Washington Post. January 6, 2011.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.