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Is Ethiopian fascination by Tunisia and Egypt justified?

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I tend to think that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopian fascination with the Tunisian and Egyptian popular revolutions exceeds any other. This admiration emanates from wishes and aspirations among Ethiopia's youth and small Ethiopia middle class to see similar changes in their homeland. While it is too early to draw parallels between the "the Jasmine Revolution," Tahrir Square and the popular "Arab Spring" middle class and youth led revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the rest of North Africa and the Middle East on the one hand and the situation in Ethiopia on the other, the social, economic and political triggers are identical. These are **repressive governance, income inequality, endemic corruption, illicit outflow of resources, bulge in size and unemployment among youth, poverty, endemic corruption, dependency on external funding, food inflation and shortages and a government** that is completely out of touch from the needs of the population.

Most Ethiopians in the Diaspora appreciate the huge differences between Ethiopia on the one hand and Tunisia and Egypt on the other. At the same time, they feel that there are similarities. The Egyptian popular uprising has been in the making for at least three decades; Ethiopia's for 20 years. Ethiopian intellectuals say that popular revolts in Egypt and Tunisia benefitted hugely from unique internal conditions that are different from Ethiopia. They identify at least **six important attributes** as instrumental in both countries that differ from Ethiopia.

Homogeneity and ethnic divide

First is the common thread of homogeneity of their populations. Ethiopia's population estimated today at 90 million is composed of 80 different ethnic groups. Second is the national character of their defense establishments. The Ethiopian defense establishment is led entirely by representatives of a minority ethnic group that dominates the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Most Ethiopians feel that the country's predominantly minority ethnic command weakens its national character. Ethiopians appreciate the fact that the defense establishment in Egypt represents the country as a unified nation and is not bedeviled by ethnicity or ideology. Ethiopians admire the fact that Egyptians and Tunisians fight as nationals of their respective countries. Ethiopians are divided by ethnicity. They hope that this artificial division does not spread to religion. Muslims and Christians co-existed side by side peacefully for centuries, a tradition that is rare in the world. Third, populations in Egypt and Tunisia have enormous respect for their national institutions. Many are not sure if Ethiopians are uniformly patriotic and bound by the same national spirit and respect for their institutions and cultures.

Fourth, Egypt and Tunisia have larger middle and educated classes that are cohesive than Ethiopia's. In terms of popular revolutions this distinction is among the most important. Petty jealousies and hatreds are minimal in these countries compared to Ethiopia. Fifth, Tunisians and Egyptians enjoy more access to information technology than Ethiopians; is another critical difference. Ethiopia is one of the least technology friendly countries in the world today; not by choice but by government restrictions. The technological tools they needed--Internet, Mobile phones, Face Book, You Tube, Twitter and newspapers are more readily available to them than to Ethiopians. Sixth, the banners they use such as flags and songs are national. "We are Tunisians and Egyptians." These themes resonate with Ethiopians who feel that the governing party uses ethnic divide and rule to govern the country. The general sentiment is that when people unite as one, no power can stop them. These are attributes Ethiopians admire about Egypt and Tunisia.

Egypt has a special appeal for Ethiopians because of the Nile and because Muslims and Christians live side by side in the two countries and relations goes back thousands of years. Ethiopians were glued to various media on February 1, 2011 when close to two million Egyptians from diverse backgrounds gathered and prayed and protested together for the same

cause. Ethiopians with access to the media admired the civility, national pride and unity among Egyptians. The message that came across was Egyptians were not beset by ideological, political, religious, gender, demographic and social differences. They subordinated them to the greater quest of freedom, the rule of law and political pluralism. The Egyptian flag served as a symbol of national unity and identity. The vast majority of protestors showed levels of discipline and camaraderie unparalleled anywhere. In particular, Ethiopians admired the Egyptian defense establishment that refused to “kill” its own citizens. This contrasted with Ethiopia where hundreds were killed and close to 40,000 people jailed by security and police in the aftermath of the 2005 elections. The parallel that seems similar with Egypt is the grassroots popular revolution in Ethiopia that brought down the Imperial regime in the 1970s; and the huge protests in support of democratization in 2005. In both instances, Ethiopians struggled and protested as one people. Differences and similarities aside, Ethiopians continue to feel that Egypt and Tunisia offer them tantalizing lessons in peaceful change. As recently as June 12, forums were held by the Ethiopian Diaspora on what is called “Ethiopian Awakening and the Arab Spring,” at which prominent Egyptians shared lessons of experience with people-led and grassroots revolutions.

The search for freedom, justice, the rule of law and people-anchored governance is the same in all three and in many Sub-Saharan African countries governed by authoritarian and dictatorial governments. At the same time, the differences between Ethiopia on the one hand and Tunisia and Egypt on the other are substantial. Tunisia has an expanding and highly educated youth; and a rising and urbanized middle class. This is the same for Egypt. Both countries more urbanized and integrated with developed economies than Ethiopia. Repression, oppression, concentration of wealth in a few hands, corruption, youth unemployment, food price inflation and income inequality are deep in all three countries. unmet expectations in employment and incomes, corruption and repression are deep. The outside world portrays all three countries as generally stable and growing. For example, “The IMF last Country Report on Egypt, published in April 2010” reported that “Sustained and wide-ranging reforms since 2004 had reduced fiscal, monetary and external vulnerabilities, and improved the investment climate.” The IMF Representative said practically the same thing about Ethiopia. Ethiopia is home to “one of the hungriest and unhealthiest populations” in the world. Sixty to seventy percent of Ethiopian youth is unemployed. There are 5 million orphans. Despite this, the IMF commends Ethiopia’s outstanding economic performance and improvements in standard of living. It seems that the script from outside is the same for all three countries. Ethiopian academics say that the IMF finds nothing wrong with chronic inflation and youth unemployment, endemic corruption and illicit outflow of billions of dollars from one the least developed and poorest countries to rich nations. In its previous report on Egypt, the IMF had said that “economic performance was better than expected, although headline inflation remains elevated.” Most Ethiopian elites feel that multilateral agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank do injustice to the poor and youth by presenting rosy pictures on countries in social crisis. “There were imminent, overwhelming problems that either evaded the IMF’s attention or it chose not to report...The risk of a social explosion would have been obvious to observers, right? Not to the IMF.”^{2/}

The youth bulge and social crisis

High youth unemployment in all three countries is a common thread as are the sizes of their youth populations. Almost 40 million Ethiopians were born after 1991. They have experiences only with one ruling party and one leader in their life time. The Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, rules with an iron-fist and has been in power since 1991. The same is true for millions of Egyptian and Tunisian youth. Bloomberg estimates that Tunisia must create 1 million jobs per year to keep up with those entering the labor market each year. Ethiopia seems to have given up on the prospect of creating jobs for millions. Thousands of youth immigrate to all corners of the world each month because they don’t see prospects at

home. The social and economic situations for youth are almost the same in Ethiopia, Egypt and Tunisia. “The worsening economy, combined with repression and resentment of corruption around President Ben Ali, set Tunisia up for a fall. The protests started when a 26-year old fruit and vegetable seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, set fire to himself on December 17, 2010.” Ethiopians were awed and moved by this death that led to the “Jasmine Revolution.” Many Ethiopians say that the level of oppression and repression by the one party state in Ethiopia are much worse. This Tunisian incident and what followed is implanted in a growingly restive and youthful generation in Ethiopia. The country’s double digit growth masks structural and policy distortions and imbalances in Ethiopia the same way as they do in Tunisian and Egypt. These structural imbalances and inequities caused are felt daily by millions of people, especially youth in all three countries. Similar to Ethiopia--a non-oil producing country--growth in Tunisia disguised high **unemployment, price escalation and gaping differences in incomes and life styles between rich and poor.**

What motivates youth to change systems?

Ethiopia is poorer and less developed than Egypt and Tunisia. At the end of 2010 Bloomberg estimated that per capita income in Tunisia reached \$9,500 compared to Ethiopia’s at \$370. Sixty-seven percent of the Tunisian population is urbanized; 80 percent of Ethiopians are rural. Tunisia has one of the highest literacy rates in the Arab world; Ethiopia one of the lowest in the world. High levels of literacy, a rising middle class, social networking strengthened by radio, television, the Internet, mobile phones, You-tube, twitter and newspapers boosted communications in Tunisia. This is still a prerequisite in Ethiopia. Repression and fear did not deter Tunisia’s highly integrated population from organizing and sharing information quickly and effectively. In contrast, Ethiopia is one of the least networked and urbanized countries in Africa. It has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world. It suffers from ethnic-based divide and rule. The country’s young adults defined as those aged between 15 to 29 years is estimated at 50.3 percent and is almost similar to Tunisia. This is why demographers call this age group a “bulge” that might explode any time anywhere. This is the group that demands unrestricted political rights and civil liberties and equitable programs in education, health care, housing, information technology and employment. Similar to Tunisia, the Ethiopian government relies on continued exodus of this age group to foreign countries as a permanent solution to poor governance and lack of opportunities at home. Like Tunisians and Egyptians, Ethiopians say that the government must open opportunities and allow unrestricted freedoms to harness information technology and to create small and medium size enterprises that would employ millions. 3/

Isolation and fear: a common phenomenon

In contrast to Tunisia, **isolation** is a way of life in Ethiopia. It is predominantly rural and practically shutout of the information revolution that has swept the rest of the world. There is minimum mobility and social networking. Access to news and information is among the lowest in the world. This is compounded by fear and regime reinforcement of ethnic and religious differences. Ethiopia’s poor has minimal or no education. Representation of females in schools and public positions is among the lowest in Africa. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, Ethiopia’s poor have no time to reflect and protest. They are largely isolated from one another and fragmented along ethnic lines; and they can’t share information with one another. This condition allows the regime and ethnic elites to manipulate, divide, entice and keep the poor and unconnected under control. Lack of education and access to information and almost total isolation from one another make them weak and vulnerable. The regime’s draconian measures against the population in 2005 are still fresh in the minds of people. Its political organization that places a premium on ethnic loyalty compounds the problem. Ethiopians say that the regime uses ethnic fear to bolster divisions, mutual suspicion and disempowerment and to create a sense of permanent suspense. The regime bribes the poor and educated and

forces them to its side. Ethiopia is more aid dependent than either Tunisia or Egypt. It is the largest aid recipient in Africa and the third largest in the world after Afghanistan and Iraq. The government uses aid as instrument of punishment and control. Unlike youth in Tunisia, Ethiopians do not enjoy unrestricted access to modern information technology. Fear permeates the society. It seems to breed more fear instead of bold and daring response to repression, oppression and poverty. Accepting this fear culture has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, most talented Ethiopian intellectuals hide behind the mask of anonymity. They want freedom for the Ethiopian people; but think that someone should offer it to them. Egyptians and Tunisians show the world that no power in the world can stop an outraged and angry population. Most highly educated Ethiopians say that these two societies teach us the cardinal lesson that those who wish to establish a people-centered society of freedom--political liberties and human rights--must set aside minor differences and struggle in unison. Ethiopians remind one another that the country's youth are not novices to uprisings. They are among pace-setters of change in Africa. In the 1970s, they closed ranks; and brought down the Imperial regime. Repression and brutality by the Socialist Military regime from 1974 to 1991 prompted all segments of society and especially youth to come together as Ethiopians. Popular opinion is that in the aftermath of the 2005 elections, the Ethiopian people showed the whole world commitment to political liberties, human rights and the rule of law. This is generally true. Many say that this remarkable history of popular struggle against oppression and brutality for which thousands of innocent Ethiopians sacrificed their lives may serve as a gentle reminder of the potential that exists.

Well informed international and domestic experts agree with the Ethiopian public sentiment that that the Ethiopian economy must respond to five major social and economic problems: a) rising food inflation and shortages in urban areas; b) persistent hunger in rural areas that requires recurring international food aid; c) high unemployment among youth; d) growing income inequality, corruption and illicit outflow of resources estimated at between US\$8.345 to US\$11 billion over the past 20 years; and e) closure of political, social and economic space for the majority of the population. These, they argue, constitute the objective social and economic conditions for a peaceful revolution similar to Egypt and Tunisia.

The above is generally true. However, there are substantial disagreements among Ethiopians on the method, organization and leadership of the democratization process. Recent experience shows that the governing party will react mercilessly and cruelly against any popular uprising. While those who want change draw hope and inspiration from the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, realists say that these two countries and Ethiopia are very different. They contend that the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF) headed by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is more like Libya, Syria and Yemen than Egypt or Tunisia. The differences between these two and Ethiopia dwarf the similarities. In Part two of this series, I will examine other cases in the Arab world that may be closer to the Ethiopian reality than either Egypt or Tunisia.

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