

Reverse Ethiopia's Institutional Void; and Hold TPLF Accountability

Aklog Birara (Dr))

We often revert to the opaque term lack of “good governance” when we see all sorts of ill deeds perpetrated by those who wield political power without paying attention to the moral imperative of social, political, spiritual, and environmental responsibility and accountability for crimes committed. No society can consider itself to be healthy or viable unless it holds those who perpetrate crimes against humanity; and or steal or squander public resources for private **or sectarian use accountable**. Impunity is deadly in multiple ways. The lingering effects of intolerable political traditions such as hate, greed, tribalism, sectarianism, exclusion, murder, rape, plunder, illicit outflow of funds and other crimes are so deeply tooted and systemic in Ethiopia that you cannot ignore them. You need to erase them carefully and systematically. Such a task or tasks requires or require robust, **independent and competent national** institutions, institutions that are not forced to change with regimes. Regimes and governments change constantly; but not national institutions. **Such institutions are durable and predictable**. The British Parliamentary system persists regardless of elections.

Countries with predictable and durable institutions often enjoy what is called “**good governance**.” Championed by development experts over the past few decades, “good governance” describes how government, state and corporate officials carryout the affairs of the corporate body as well as administer and manage precious public resources such as budgets, foreign exchange, minerals, lands etc. The ultimate test is **positive social impact** rather than solo efficiency and enrichment of the few. Simply put, governance is about policy and decision-making and the institutional processes by which planned outcomes are reached.

My focus in this commentary is whether or not Ethiopia possesses the requisite national institutions in order to reconcile, arbitrate, and resolve and govern competing interests with the ultimate objective of **servicing the common good**. **Strong national institutions such as a Central Bank, national defense, national security, an independent judiciary, professional police force, independent media, a customs system that is professional and above reproach and so on are** guided by clear, transparent and measurable standards that minimize social and political risks and maximize social and economic returns in the medium and long-term. Durable institutions built to serve generations to come are a matter of life and death for any society. **Believing in tomorrow is therefore vital for institutional success**.

Given such strong national institutions that are established with the sole intent of serving all citizens rather than persons, clans, classes, parties and ethnic or nationality groups, a nation's future can be predicted or projected to do better. Strong national institutions mitigate risks. On the other hand, clan based, ethnic and party dominated institutions compound risks. Over time, these risks that were hidden or suppressed or controlled by a myriad of interwoven network of benefactors and sheer force explode, **most often by tsunami like social forces** who were suppressed, oppressed and marginalized. The period November 2015 to the accession of Dr.

Abiy as Prime Minister in April 2018, comes to mind. I commend Ethiopian youth for making history.

In August 2016, I wrote a series under the **title “A Race to the Bottom”** and another series in early 2017 entitled **“Ethiopia Encircled and Endangered.”** Both showed Ethiopia’s rapid slide towards civil war and Balkanization. Fortunately, neither one occurred. We are now on a new trajectory of what I would like to call **“Ethiopia’s Rise to the Top.”** Unless we Ethiopians allow counter social and political forces to reemerge, the only sensible and sane path for Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people is to **rebuild national institutions that were destroyed systematically** and deliberately by the TPLF over the past 27 years. This requires farsighted and bold leadership. It requires that we think beyond ethnicity, clan, class or religion. Institutions are not about the Amhara; Oromo, Wolayta, Tigray or this or that party. If we talk about the rule of law and then institutions that enforce them, they make no distinction whether I am poor or rich or black or white.

This is the reason why I believe in strong national institutions staffed by high caliber and morale personnel.

Who crushed and dismantled Ethiopian national institutions?

The TPLF and its cohort of supporters were able to govern and plunder by using de-institutionalization or de-construction as a tool. When you deconstruct something, you make sure that nothing is left to chance. It is an art perfected to the level of the nuclear family. Remember the 5 to one or one to 5 surveillance system imposed by the TPLF. It was as Orwellian as it can be. The Ethiopian people lived through this dark and oppressive system for almost three decades.

Without doubt, it is the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) that concocted the new narrative of Amhara “imperialism or oppression” over the rest. Despite Ethiopia’s long and renowned history as a melting pot of diverse peoples and cultures, the TPLF issued a Manifesto of ethnic hate and exclusion targeting the Amhara. For a while it weaponized ethnic hate of the Oromo against the Amhara and both against Tigreans etc. . . . It organized itself on a preferential basis, crushing anyone and everyone that opposed its special and privileged status; rewarding its members selectively and deliberately; and deploying every tool imaginable to create discord among brotherly people. It concocted mini-ethnic groups in order to reduce numbers; and to **strengthen resistance and permanent discord.**

Inevitably, social and economic networks among Ethiopia’s diverse population began to fall apart. **Ethnic and or tribal loyalty** that in most other multiethnic societies, for example, the USA, India, Ghana and numerous others, that are urbanizing fast and where citizens’ rights are deemed far more important **became pronounced in Ethiopia.** In well-governed nations, ethnic or tribal identity (culture, language, history and other rights) are protected and defended by their respective constitutions. This does not mean, however, that there is a perfect system.

There is no such thing as a perfect governance system. Human beings are never perfect; that is why they need the rule of law and institutions that administer them justly.

I suggest that, no matter how one diagnoses it, the TPLF ethnic narrative is exclusionary and outdated. Tragically for all concerned, the TPLF core group is warmongering. It does not offer an inclusionary alternatives. Since it is exclusionary and discriminatory, it is anti-**citizens' rights and anti-democracy**. It is also expansionist and **incessantly money hungry**. As a consequence, it is a burden on Ethiopian society, including Tigreans.

For close to three decades, the TPLF exercised overwhelming and singular policy and decision-making power and authority over the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front's government. It changed the Ethiopian narrative with a vengeance, rewriting history and culture; **reengineering the social and political culture of the country**; forcibly reeducating youth and forcing them to reject Ethiopia and ኢትዮጵያዊነት. In their place, it propagated and inculcated narrow **ethnic and some opine, racial identity**. This ethnic or tribal affiliation and identity served as the primary criteria for incomes, coveted jobs and access to wealth and riches. These assets emanate from policy and decision-making reinforced by the party, state, government and institutions created to buffet a corrosive sand corrupt system.

Exclusionary and discriminatory policies and programs require power tools. Among these are institutions such defense, national security, a surveillance system, media, diplomatic posts and the requisite materials to support them. The TPLF was deliberate and systematic in staffing these institutions with loyalists and beneficiaries. Generals and other high officers were vested by the TPLF core not only with decision-making authority; but also with enormous wealth. These massive wealth captured by the TPLF and its cohort has been extracted from the Ethiopian poor, the middle class, professionals, ordinary soldiers and other citizens. Because of the need for loyalty and secrecy, it was inevitable that the bulk of recruits and beneficiaries would be Tigrean nationals.

It is therefore disingenuous and misleading to argue today that Prime Minister Dr. Abiy is going after Tigrean generals, other high officers, private sector thieves and their associates exclusively and in a discriminatory manner. Such pundits should have cried "thief" when innocent Ethiopians were being killed; when billions of dollars was being siphoned off to foreign hiding places. In any case, the staffing bias is telling.

A cursory review of statistical data of high officers in the above establishments, in Metec, EAL and other pillars of the Ethiopian economy provide a plethora of supporting evidence that the TPLF and its loyalists dominated Ethiopian society to the hilt.

The newly minted TPLF military, security and surveillance system is not only cruel and brutal; it is equally greedy, resource starved and seeking and corrupt. This corrosive force needs to be cleansed. Prime Minister Dr. Abiy is therefore right in his bold move to cleanse the corrupt and repressive national security, surveillance and defense system. Ethiopia deserves a dedicated, professional, patriotic and well-paid military establishment whose primary responsibility is the preservation of Ethiopia's territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty; and the implementation of the rule of law.

Two examples in malpractice in the governance of corporate entities illustrate the gravity and magnitude of the problem. The unraveling of Metec, a corporate body established with Ethiopian capital in the **amount of Birr 10 billion**, was, instead captured by the TPLF and its loyalists. The arrest of 40 managers

and others associated with Metec, including the chairman Brigadier General Kifle Dagneu, who was arrested in Humera (Gondar) while trying to escape, serves as a case study in organized clan or group theft. The crime committed by Metec is so huge that it requires more in-depth research. Ethiopian Registrar and others report that Metec management is responsible for **the loss of 30 billion** Birr that is still unaccounted for. Most of the generals and other high officers identified by name hail from the same affinity group, namely, the TPLF.

Metec management perfected the art of graft, thievery, corruption and illicit outflow of funds through the following tools:

- The purchase or procurement of machinery, tools and other items without competitive bidding;
- The practice of increasing procurement costs by as much as 400 percent; and the bilking or pocketing of the difference;
- The diversion of monies out of the country;
- The preferential allotment of construction contracts to preferred or loyal supporters of the TPLF and extended family;
- The purchase of high value machinery such as cranes; and the diversion of one or more to preferred persons;
- The beneficial practice of working closely with the defense establishment dominated by the TPLF, for example, in the construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and other capital construction projects;
- The selective use of preferred suppliers and service providers and the exclusion of the rest of Ethiopians; and,
- The outright grant of an estimated **205 million Birr** procurement to one preferred person 21 times and another 15 times.

I can suggest a menu of options to redress this economic crime. The most obvious one proposed by the government is “to freeze assets.” What if most have been taken out of the country illicitly? I believe the government should ask governments throughout the world to help trace and freeze assets; and to apply the full force of international law, including the Magnitsky Act to go after known criminals and their accomplices. **No criminal should live with impunity.**

In all of these episodes, there was not a single Ethiopian global institution or person or group that demanded disclosure and accountability. It seems that, while Ethiopia was bleeding and the society crushed with debilitating poverty, we were all under the fearful spell of the TPLF—also crushed and helpless!!

While some of us may argue that theft, graft, corruption and illicit outflow of funds can't be attributed to specific members of an ethnic group, I suggest that this argument is flawed. We can say the same thing about Apartheid South Africa. The TPLF could not have plundered, killed, maimed, raped and committed other horrendous crimes if it did not organize and operate as a closed and secretive Tigrean nationality group. One can't forget the fact that Ethiopian embassies served as exclusive quarters of the TPLF and its coterie of admirers and beneficiaries. Embassies too were effectively captured; and some are still in the hands of TPLF's strong and extended hand.

The TPLF would not have dismantled Ethiopian institutions and replaced them with TPLF led and managed institutions without an assortment of supporters, most of them beneficiaries of the system. It had succeeded in recruiting, enticing and rewarding other ethnic groups.

From EAL to TAL

The second example is **Ethiopian Airlines**, one of the most successful national institutions with a track record of a capable and competent cadre of professionals representing the country's best and brightest. Once it seized power, the TPLF began staffing EAL with its own personnel. Nothing was left to chance. In a complete overhaul or reengineering of the corporation, TPLF cadres were selected and appointed, first to top positions. In turn, these TPLF cadres began dismissing hundreds of Ethiopians from their jobs; and replaced them wholesale with Tigrean nationals. For all practical purposes, **EAL became Tigrean Air Lines** (TAL).

Despite its impeccable evolution as a global player, EAL epitomizes all of the ills of corporate mal-governance including the mindset and values of its board of directors. Even a state owned entity whose prime responsibility is to the nation and its citizens is prone to graft, commission, corruption and exclusionary staffing. This is because it is part and parcel of a rotten system **with no accountability and institutional** oversight. A November 13, 2018 special study of EAL posted by Welkait.com and corroborated by others offers a glimpse of malpractice.

- NIPPON Airways (Japanese) purchases 5 B787 Dream Liners from Boeing. Nippon rejects the contract owing to mechanical defects; and Boeing tries to find an alternative buyer.
- EAL management moves in quickly and negotiates the purchase of the poorly designed Dream liners from Boeing for "\$90 million a plane."
- EAL management then finds a buyer in Latin America and sells each air craft for "\$120 million, earning a profit of \$30 million on each of the 5" or an **astonishing \$150 million total.** While more research is needed to establish the facts and the beneficiaries, this transaction is an economic crime against Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people.
- The clever Latin American entrepreneur negotiates a deal with EAL management and leases the 5 technically flawed Dream liners to EAL for a period of "25 years." In the process, agents are said to "have **pocketed \$15 million** in commission."
- EAL management is said to have agreed to pay "**\$800,000 to \$1.25 million per** month to the Latin American Leasing Company."
- Four of the Dream Liners leased are said to be "mothballed" thereby compounding the cost to EAL.
- Put to use, each Dreamliner would have earned EAL about \$110,000 each day.
- Four of the five planes are reported to be out of operations.

Tragically for EAL and the Ethiopian people, there is no independent oversight to speak of that would conduct thorough and quick investigation of EAL's management. EAL is a national institution and must be governed by international standards that befit a modern corporation.

In addition to the above malpractice, there are several other areas of administrative, financial and personnel management that deserve immediate attention.

1. It is reported that the CEO of EAL and Brigadier General Kinfe (Metec) “own and operate a private aircraft that serves the island nation of Seychelles, Egypt and Tanzania.” It is also said that the CEO “has built and operates a 5 star hotel in Seychelles.” There is nothing wrong with either economic or trade activity as long as these are done above board and are accounted for. But, they are not. The hotel serves members of the TPLF as well as Metec executives.
2. An estimated **\$67 million in ticket sales** is said to have been “diverted” illicitly and hoarded abroad contributing to **the billions stolen** from Ethiopian society.
3. An additional **“\$85 million of transactions** conducted by **Metec and Wogagen Bank** at home and abroad in foreign exchange has been accounted for in Ethiopian Birr thereby denying Ethiopia precious foreign exchange.
4. EAL’s human capital has been eroded substantially because of deliberate ethnicization and sectarianism.
5. Top echelons of EAL, including the CEO, close relatives and others are said to “own at least 4 huge buildings in Addis Ababa...the construction is carried-out by Sunshine Construction Co., “ another obscure corporation that requires scrutiny.
6. EAL’s effort to construct homes for hardworking Ethiopian employees has been thwarted by the same TPLF policy of giving “preferential treatment to Tigrean nationals.” Making matters even worse, the selected contractor “Afro –TSION” took the money without a trace.
7. In some countries such as Indonesia, those who steal build bridges, schools and factories. In Ethiopia thieves leave no positive trace.
8. EAL’s digital and media infrastructure serves as a political tool of the TPLF. The “120 employees deployed in this sector propagate animosity and hate” rather than create a healthy environment in which each and every one is obliged to serve the public.
9. To my knowledge there has not been a credible and independent audit of EAL covering all critical areas of this corporate entity that is vital for Ethiopia’s modernization.

To his credit, Prime Minister Dr. Abiy has begun the boldest and most sweeping change ever. He has started arresting and holding party, federal and regional officials that bled Ethiopia; and disempowered 110 million citizens through governance tools that in other countries are deemed crimes against humanity. This bold move must be sustained and buttressed by strong national institutions and good corporate governance of private sector and public enterprises.

How did the TPLF do this?

1. It undermined Ethiopia’s renowned culture of mutual love of country, acceptance, tolerance, generosity, sharing, and the proclivity towards kindness. Greed, theft, instant material and financial gratification without producing any tangible product became pronounced.

2. It laser-focused by dismantling “Ethiopia’s well-known and well-established intelligence, security and defense institutions. Well-trained professionals were forced to become “beggars” or to leave their homeland etc. Using its newly acquired political power, the TPLF and its recruits acquired the most important asset in the country, namely, the entire financial, monetary and budgetary, natural resources and other economic infrastructure. It was a perfect pyramid; and it worked for decades.

Political and economic power were hopelessly intertwined to the point where no academic or intellectual could decipher the boundaries. Where does the power of the party stop? What, if any national institution or civil society or other has the power to restrain excesses, including extrajudicial measures? No institution to speak of. **The TPLF operated as an omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent force. Everyone lived in an environment of fear and suspicion.**

This suffocating and crushing environment offered the TPLF and its cohorts and allies unprecedented opportunity to plunder **with abundance and without shame and limit.** The party, state and government operated as part of the same machinery of theft, graft, commission, corruption and illicit outflow of funds to the tune of tens of billions of dollars. The state and government became enablers rather than buffers.

How did the TPLF machinery last so long?

It used numerous tools. It enriched its cohort of supporters (both domestic and foreign); and suppresses the hopes and aspirations of the vast majority of the population. It determined “war and peace.” It invited in anyone who has money and global or regional influence; and created collaborators. It showed a low regard for Ethiopia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty and the peaceful coexistence of the country’s mosaic of nations and religions. Given its proclivity to dominate at any cost, the TPLF literally undermined Ethiopian nationalism and diminished the social, cultural, spiritual, economic and political bonds and cohesion of Ethiopia’s diverse population.

The TPLF dismantled Ethiopia’s highly integrated national security and defense infrastructure and institutions; and created a TPLF dominated intelligence, security, defense and foreign relations architecture totally dedicated to the party.

The TPLF politicized faith as much as ethnicity and defense. Some say this politicization provided fuel to those determined to divide the population as never before. Witness the burning of churches, homes and properties reinforcing fear, and mistrust and unnecessary division. The politicization of ethnicity and religion are both corrosive and dangerous. What is needed a unity of purpose; and a collaborative effort among Ethiopia’s elites to promote, nurture and institutionalize genuine equality among ethnic and religious groups as well as to create a solid foundation for the formation of a multinational and multi-religious democratic Ethiopian state and government that includes everyone and excludes no one. This challenge **cannot be left to chance. Why genuine multiparty democracy now?**

Democracy reinforces mutual tolerance

The only road-map in averting the critical problems identified above is political pluralism that mirrors Ethiopia's diversity. Over the past quarter century, one observes a continuum of repression and exclusion unprecedented in the 21st century. Among other things, TPLF's anti-democratic and anti-people and anti-Ethiopian initiative is the art of perfecting an anti-democratic political tradition of conspiracy and mistrust. This diminishes productive economic and social capital immeasurably. The TPLF did not trust Ethiopian faith institutions—both Christian and Muslim that operated and coexist side by side. This unbreakable bond must be strengthened even further.

We need to halt pessimism and augment optimism

If you are only accountable to yourself and to your party, you can afford to spread mistrust and pessimism. Sadly, the TPLF is brilliant at creating and promoting mistrust among victims. Mistrust that if this or that political group—whether multiethnic or ethnic or a blend---takes political power the country won't survive and the growth work that the current ruling party has initiated will dissipate. This deliberate and strategic narrative reinforces and exploits the pessimism and fear that characterizes Ethiopian society irrespective of ethnic or religious or class or gender or demographic affiliation.

When fear permeates society, everyone is mistrustful of everyone else. This is why the spy network of 5 to 1, that is, one person monitoring and spying on five people had worked until youth broke it to pieces. This is true whether we are referring to Tigray or Gambella or Amara or Oromia etc. In today's Ethiopia, fear and mistrust are giving way to mutual trust and boldness. Freedom is infectious. The masters of deceit had exploited the psychology of pessimism, conspiracy, mistrust and fear in order to rule without challenge. This too is breaking apart faster than anyone thought possible.

Retrospectively and In the process of this fear and mistrustful political and social culture, those of us who defend genuine equality through inclusion, a level playing field for every Ethiopian, **the rule of law and** political pluralism for a multiethnic suited for a multiethnic country are becoming quite irrelevant relative to the challenges Ethiopia faces.

Why? Among other things, we have incapacitated ourselves by focusing on the wrong problem, namely mutual mistrust and fear. Because we have failed, we still mistrust and demonize one another and refuse to talk to one another. How can we resolve problems without the courage to meet and talk to one another? Independent observers agree that those who oppose the ruling party and entertain a better alternative for the country guide conversations, relationships that bolster togetherness (አንድነት).

By this I mean bringing disparate, scattered, disjointed individuals and groups together horizontally regardless of clan, ethnicity, religion, gender, class or other segmentation. You can't build a nation unless you pull together; and you can't pull together unless you are willing

to learn from one another. It is always good to be modest and heed to Albert Einstein whose eternal guide in solving problems is this. "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Or paradigm of thinking must change in fundamental ways.

The TLPF agenda of ethnic divide and rule, demean and perpetuate hate, intimidate and crush, forcibly evict and or make people disappear, buy and bribe, endear and entertain the foreign community at public expense etc. served well for over 25 years. Fortunately, this narrative is over. Abiy's government has now assumed its State and Government responsibilities to the public by making culprits accountable for misdeeds. This bold move must continue and must be institutionalized.

I am pleased to note that the fear of two governments operating in the same country is evaporating like a morning dew. There is indeed a functioning government led by responsible Ethiopians.

Whether internal or external the government's primary function is to maintain law and order, peace and stability all done in the name of national security as well as sustainable and equitable growth. Incredible as it may seem, paid for by the Ethiopian people, the country-wide network of repression that operated exclusively on behalf of the TPLF pyramid and its political as well as its massive economic, financial and natural resources, investments and long-term interests is breaking faster than anyone thought was possible a few months ago.

Who would have thought that the die-hard supporter of the TPLF governing machinery, Senator James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma would now champion the fundamental changes led by Prime Minister Dr. Abiy?

Does this mean that our work is done? Not at all. I believe, in addition **to restoring tens of billions of dollars of stolen moneys** to Ethiopia and the Ethiopian people, the focus of attention over the next two years is building durable and predictable national institutions such as defense, national security, judiciary, federal police, election board and others; and dismantling, nationalizing, restructuring the myriad of institutions created by the TPLF, including party owned enterprises and endowments.

An additional and critical institution building is making the political, social, spiritual, economic environment much more enabling, empowering and robust. Elections are meaningless without effective, open and strong competition. The responsibility resides both with the governing party, with the fragmented opposition and with civil society.

I am optimistic that, at last, Ethiopians will demonstrate to themselves (ourselves) and to the world that a great country won't allow itself to sink to the bottom. Rather, it will transform itself into a just, democratic and prosperous multiethnic nation within the next quarter century.

November 16, 2018

