



Ethiopia: What PM Abiy's Glasnost Means for the Region

By Miriam Abraham



"I never thought I would witness this in my lifetime", remarked an Ethiopian friend. He was referring to the warm embrace between Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia and Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki in Addis Ababa a few days ago. In the past few weeks, I have heard these words from many colleagues who, like me, shuttled for many years between Asmara and Addis Ababa in our elusive efforts to normalize relations between the two "cousins" The sight of an Ethiopian Airlines flight landing in Asmara reminded us of how during the shuttle diplomacy days, we could not fly directly between the two capitals, even with chartered flights, lest we violated the airspace of sworn enemies.

Since his appointment in April, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has been shaking things up in a way that no leader in East Africa has done in decades. It has been exciting to witness the courage of this youthful leader who has formally ended the 1998-2000 border war with Eritrea which killed at least 80,000; rescinded an unpopular state of emergency; announced plans to partially open up the economy; released thousands of political prisoners and taken nascent steps to deal with human rights violations in prisons; and de-listed the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ogaden National Liberation Front, and the 'Ginbot 7' from the infamous "terrorist" groups list, among others.

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recounting the new optimism that Prime Minister Abiy has brought to our region especially when one considers the gloomy picture elsewhere. In Kenya, the sham fight against corruption has dominated headlines, only competing with Uganda's absurd implementation of a social media tax. South Sudan just marked its seventh Independence Day with little reason to celebrate as, among other things, the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on the country. In Tanzania, President John Pombe Magufuli has joined his neighbours Rwanda and Burundi, in choosing to rule with an iron fist, curtailing basic freedoms and declaring that the ruling party will reign forever.

While it is too early to uncork the champagne, the men and women of Ethiopia and Eritrea deserve credit for the changes taking place. The grenade attack at the first major rally organized by Prime Minister Abiy in Addis Ababa on the 23rd of June confirms that spoilers will attempt to destabilize the situation. There are still many unanswered questions on the political machinations within the EPRDF, especially with regard to the TPLF. Prime Minister Abiy is moving with lightning speed and we hope that there is a reasonable buy-in from the EPRDF regarding the decisions he is making. On the regional front, while there is much to celebrate at the warming of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, access of the Assab port by Ethiopia potentially bears an economic backlash to some of the neighbours.

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Let me be clear. The changes underway could not have been possible without the sacrifices of many Ethiopians and Eritreans who fought for many years for inclusivity, equality, democracy and justice. In Ethiopia, despite threats to their lives, they fought Mengistu Haile Mariam's Derg regime as well as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)'s system of ethnic-based federalism in place since 1995. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 1,000 people have been killed and tens of thousands arrested for participating in political protests that began in November 2015.

The wind of change in Ethiopia and Eritrea ought to leave many of the current leaders in East Africa anxious, for many reasons.

First, it is a reminder that efforts to clamp down on democracy, stifle fundamental freedoms and rights, promote divisive policies and participate in electoral thuggery inevitably have an end. Elections held since 1994 in Ethiopia have been referred to by observers as "multi-party theatre staged by a single party state". Despite hundreds of people killed and tens of thousands detained, the people of Ethiopia did not stop organising anti-government protests. Mostly led by the youth, their leaders were detained or killed but they continued to protest against what they perceived as domination of the political and economic levers of power by the minority Tigray community who make up 6.1 percent of the population.

They were not deterred by the fact that they are a country of more than 80 ethnic groups, with the constitution formally providing for ethnic-based political organisations. They organised across the different ethnicities with this unity sending a strong message to the EPRDF that the security

crackdown against the Oromia (making up 34.4 percent of the population) was not sustainable as the Amhara (making up 27 percent of the population) and other ethnic groups joined the protests. They mobilised around their grievances, defying ethnic labels and further jolting the EPRDF into making a weak attempt at political reform as a way to placate the protesters. However, the minimalistic changes and violent crackdown did not assuage those pushing for change including within the ruling EPRDF itself, leading to Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation in February.

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Those in power in East Africa should draw an important lesson from this – when a country is ready for change, there is nothing that any one leader can do to stop it. The aspirations of the people can be suppressed for a period, but not forever. It is also a confirmation that fomenting political divisions along ethnic lines is ultimately counterproductive. Attempts by one ethnic group, the Tigray, to dominate the political and economic levers of power may have appeared successful in the past 25 years but this is no longer tenable. Those leaders in East Africa who are relying on ethnic loyalties or domination to sustain themselves in power should learn from the Ethiopians that populations can organize beyond those ethnic groups when the wind of change blows. And to those struggling to organize for change in the rest of the region, it is important to build a broader coalition beyond ethnic or socio-political groups. Organizing in this generation requires an approach of direct engagement with communities, distributive leadership beyond a core group of leaders and dialogue that allows people to build an ecosystem for change.

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Second, high economic growth does not a cushion against a people's desire for change. The trajectory of Ethiopia's economy debunks arguments posited by some political economists that rising per capita income leads to poverty reduction, helping to create stable and peaceful societies. Ethiopia's economic growth has been one of the highest in the East African region with projections of 10 percent growth in 2017. Yet, as David Ndii argues in his article, the country faces an economic crisis, which partly explains the recent political changes in the country. The economic policies adopted by the regime that have focused on infrastructure-led growth have left the country in a dire political and economic situation.

And yet several countries in East Africa are increasing their economic vulnerabilities by increasing their debt to GDP ratio, investing in moribund infrastructure projects and increasing taxes without

incentives for entrepreneurship. There is no doubt that the political changes in Ethiopia have been triggered by the economic conditions in the country. Prime Minister Abiy's long-term political survival depends on how he manages the economy in the next few months. As an Ethiopian friend of mine recently told me, it was short-sighted of the EPRDF not to have known that increasing opportunities for education, rising levels of corruption without expanding opportunities for employment would accelerate the pressure for change especially in a context where the youth perceived the ruling party as the main beneficiary of economic opportunities. This is a scenario that could repeat itself in any East African country today.

Third, relying on being propped in power by the international community is unsustainable. Legitimacy is not granted by outsiders, it is earned by delivering on the people's expectations and aspirations. Despite the horrendous human rights violations by the EPRDF over the past twenty-five years, the international community maintained an eerie silence. The geopolitics of the region meant that the United States and other powers propped up the regime rather than calling it to account for its excesses. It was perceived as an ally in the fight against terrorism especially in neighbouring Somalia; playing a balancing act in Sudan and South Sudan; and managing the sensitive Nile water politics with Egypt as well as the broader Gulf politics. The African Union, with its headquarters in Addis Ababa, issued no condemnation of even the gagging of internet that imperilled its own day-to-day operations. All these actions by the international community were not enough to keep Prime Minister Hailemariam in power.

The same could be said of those that hope that external actors will usher change in their respective countries in alone. The demanding work of mobilizing, organizing and building internal coalitions can only be successful if they are homegrown. For many years, Eritrea was reported to have supported the Oromo Liberation Front and other groups from the Somali region of Ethiopia with the goal of changing the regime. Ethiopia is reported to have been supporting opposition groups against Asmara. Many of these groups also had support from other countries involved in proxy wars for several reasons including the Nile Basin politics. Somalia became a proxy theatre for the Eritrea-Ethiopia rivalry. The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia should potentially improve the situation in the region. The key lesson here is that external interventions either in support of a regime or against it, have their limits.

Those relying on the global North to speak out against human rights violations in Africa need to recognize that these countries have entrenched strategic political and economic interests that override all other considerations. Moreover, the global North is being reconfigured every day by the actions of the current occupant of the White House in Washington DC whose words and actions are not any different from those of Africa's strongmen. Norm setting institutions such as the African Union and the United Nations have vacated the moral pulpit leaving behind a leadership vacuum.

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Yet, despite all the gloom around, I am still cautiously optimistic about the nascent changes in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The ethnic-based federalist system in Ethiopia is being challenged reminding us all that those that seek leadership based on ethnic lines have a short lease in their governance. The future lies in disrupting the current systems of political and economic governance and seeking

to build direct and distributive forms of leadership. We will keep holding our breath for the rest of East Africa, including Kenya.

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