

BEING AN OPPOSITION POLITICIAN IN ETHIOPIA: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

Lidetu Ayalew

May 19, 2011

Introduction: A short overview of my political career

Eighteen years ago, I entered into politics as a 23-year old business man. In my first five years of opposition struggle, I was a member of different political parties and assumed varying degrees of responsibilities within those parties. In 2000, I founded a new political party together with like-minded individuals called Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP); of which I was secretary-general for six years and party president for the last five years. In 2005, I was responsible for public relations as well as assumed the role of vice-president for the oppositional coalition called Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). That same year, I won a parliamentary seat in the national elections and served as a member of parliament for five years. Two months ago, I finalized my term as president of EDP and I handed over my responsibilities to the newly-elected president and I am currently serving my party as a central committee member. In the last five years, I have authored two best-selling books on current Ethiopian political issues.

In eighteen years of politics, I have been imprisoned five times and suffered several human rights abuses. I have been the victim of character assassination which aimed at destroying my political image. As a controversial political figure, I have experienced both immense popular support and unbelievable popular contempt. I have certainly made both great mistakes and great contributions; but through it all, I have learned great lessons, some of which I would like to share in this paper.

Entering into politics

When the current government came to power from decades of guerrilla fighting in 1991, I strongly felt that new regime's policies were eroding the nation's unity and put the nation's future existence into question. It was precisely these erroneous policies, listed below, that inspired me to be a part of the political process. First, the new regime incited citizens to organize themselves politically along ethno-

linguistic lines rather than a shared ideology and vision. Second, the new constitution mainly enshrined the regime's beliefs and wishes rather than being a document upon which there could be national consensus. For example, it allowed Ethiopian ethnic groups to seek secession at any time and organized the country into an ethnic federal state based on ethno-linguistic groups. Third, in line with the state structure, government media put aside shared national values and focused more on the differences between different ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Fourth, main political and economic institutions fell into the hands of one ethnic-based minority party within the ruling coalition.

Thus, I joined the nascent oppositional struggle as a concerned citizen, largely through monetary support. However, the calling to a life of public service was stronger than just extending monetary support and in the course of time, I sank deeper and deeper into the world of politics, unable to get out of it.

Alarming insights as a novice politician

As a novice politician, beyond engaging my own party, I had a chance to closely know other parties and their leaders as well as dialogue with other politicians and the general public about major national issues. With those insights, my outlook on the state, the opposition parties and their leaders, Ethiopian intellectuals, the Ethiopian people and the main political issues began to change. In particular, those opposition parties whom I admired from afar and believed were strong were weaker than I expected both in their political judgement and organizational structure. For most opposition leaders, politics was merely a part-time job and many were merely waiting for the government to fall by fluke or some unexpected peril, rather than working for change themselves. The opposition parties constantly criticized the government for being dictatorial, ethno-centric and unintelligent; yet when I got to know them better, I saw that the opposition was guilty of the same charges.

In order to get the popular support, opposition parties tended to point out the faults of the sitting regime rather than presenting their alternatives and building up a strong, efficient organization. Despite all these weaknesses, the opposition publicly posed as unified and strong and was constantly stating that the ousting of the government was near. Most private newspapers and radio broadcasted in Ethiopia from abroad were propagating that same story. As a consequence of this exaggeration, the Ethiopian people were passively waiting for the collapse of the sitting regime instead of actively playing a role in strengthening the opposition.

As an active participant of the political struggle, I was also able to better understand the nature of the ruling party (Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front, EPDRF). I intimately learned that EPDRF was fundamentally a dictatorial organization which would commit any illegal deeds to hold on to political power and that citizens' rights were only respected as long as they did not challenge EPDRF's rule. In addition, institutions were wholly dominated by the ruling party and were used as political instruments rather than serving the public's interest. In contrast to my understanding before entering politics, I became increasingly aware that the ruling party was an extremely strong organization which was more devoted and more sacrificial in the quest of achieving its aims than any of its opponents. Further, the EPDRF did not underestimate its opponents and knew them in and out and most importantly, had a leadership who had a habit of self-evaluation and the ability to survive internal crisis.

With this new perspective on the opposition and the sitting regime, I understood that if the opposition's weaknesses were not addressed, they would not be able to overthrow the government nor bring about a better rule. As opposed to my outlook as an outside observer, I recognized that it would not suffice to change the hands of government to solve the country's problems. I realized democratic governance could never take root and flourish under circumstances where the opposition and government saw each other with such extreme hatred. Something had to change.

Measures to bring about change

The first measure I took to address the weaknesses I had identified in the opposition camp was to engage in *intra-party struggle* with other youth members of the main opposition parties. As youth leaders, we attempted to bring about change within our party by setting up forums for dialogue, debate and self-evaluation. However, our senior leaders did not see our efforts positively. Instead of trying to answer our demands in a democratic manner, the leaders accused us of having a hidden agenda to dismantle the opposition block and began to black-mail us to either stop our activities or leave the struggle. We ended up spending five years of our full time pursuing intra-party change in the belief that change would come in due time. But instead of improving, the opposition block became even more weakened. Losing hope in this first strategy, a second alternative became viable; to establish our own party. With one year's preparation, Ethiopian Democratic Party was founded in 2000.

The founders of EDP were committed to not repeat the faults of the opposition block, to strengthen the peaceful oppositional struggle and to introduce a new political approach. We devised a political program which clearly showed our ideological direction and we ratified by-laws that would strengthen intra-party democracy, especially through imposing a term-limit on the party presidency post. Moreover, EDP's strategy for change was to address all hindrances to democracy-building, whether they came from government, opposition or the people themselves. We wanted to cleanse the political struggle from bitterness and hatred and instead start from the premise of tolerance and respect of all political opponents. EDP wanted to completely remove itself from the blind oppositional struggle common in Ethiopia and instead oppose with strong reasons and positively acknowledge and support the government when it was due. Moreover, EDP announced that it was a multi-ethnic party in stark contrast to the ruling party and many other parties in Ethiopia, which were organized along ethno-linguistic lines.

EDP was established the same year as the 2000 national elections and emerged as a strong competitor in that election. In the election debates forums, EDP came well-prepared and presented a clear alternative to voters. Subsequently, many Ethiopians began to believe that a peaceful oppositional struggle and elections could be bring about change and voted in large numbers. Previously, the opposition parties had a habit of boycotting main political events by imposing pre-conditions for their participation. However, fearful of EDP's successes, the other main opposition parties began to engage unconditionally in the political process. Even the Ethiopian intellectuals which had distanced themselves in the past from politics began to show up in the political arena. To some extent, the 2000 election was a starting point for a degree of political progression towards issue politics.

Within less than one year of its foundation, EDP won two national parliamentary seats and fourteen regional parliamentary seats and was thus able to represent its constituency. EDP was successful in the efforts in uniting part of the opposition block and created a merger with three other opposition parties. This merger was the first in the political history of the country. In addition, as the main founder and front figure of EDP, my personal fame increased during this period.

Challenges that impede the change movement

Despite EDP's new ideas and strategies, based on the understanding that the old way of doing politics had failed to solve any of the country's problems, our novel approach did not gain enough traction

among the political forces nor with the people and could not continue as strongly as hoped. Our change movement faced challenges from three angles: from the government, the opposition and the general public.

The government did not see our new approach of due recognition and respect as a positive move, but as deceptive and more dangerous, in that it seriously challenged the way that the government had to interact with the opposition. Therefore, as our party grew in strength, the ruling party began a propaganda campaign against us and intimidated our members, dismissed them from civil servant jobs and ultimately began to abduct and imprison them. In addition, EDP was infiltrated by government agents who attempted to divide and weaken us from inside.

In 2001, when EDP's activities were heightened, politically-based conflicts started on the campuses of the country's universities. Using these conflicts as a pretext, the government imprisoned me and 112 active members without any court warrants. After three months of imprisonment under horrendous conditions, we were released for lack of evidence against us. This harsh government measure made it difficult to regain the momentum of our party for quite some time.

Despite the extensive government harassment, EDP stayed true to the commitment to deal with our differences with the government through dialogue and electoral competition only. However, even with the emergence of a civilized opponent, the ruling party was not able to make a shift to a political culture of tolerance – largely because its leaders were deeply shaped by the antithesis to tolerance: a rearing in hardcore Marxism and many years of guerrilla fighting.

Beyond being fearful and envious of EDP's advances, the other opposition parties were not pleased by some of our tactics and strategies, which follow below. First, we publicly criticised the weaknesses of the opposition block. Second, we positively recognized the government's good policies and deeds. Third, though we saw the ruling party as dictatorial, we did not find it useful to label them as our "enemies". Fourth, we were willing to enter into negotiations on national issues with the government without any pre-conditions.

EDP was not bothered by the opposition's discontent with our political strategies, but we did have a problem with the means which they choose to fight us and our strategies. Instead of civilly combating EDP – and possibly winning- in the arena of debates, the other opposition parties put our motives into

question and began to spread untrue rumours about us. Among these untrue rumours, it was spread that EDP was formed by the government with a secret mission to weaken the opposition. Especially, after the 2005 elections, when EDP refused to merge with the opposition coalition for various legitimate reasons and when EDP decided to assume the parliamentary seats won in the elections (which the other opposition refused), the other opposition parties together with the help of private media and opposition groups in diaspora spread rumours of life-threatening nature to EDP's leadership.

Even though our ideas were never outright rejected by the general public or any evidence was presented to the public on the various rumours thrown against us in media, the public was still not able to support us whole-heartedly. Those who were spreading the rumours were older, richer and more educated than us; and the populace were swayed to believe them over us. In the Ethiopian political culture, the focus on the personal background of political leaders rather on the merit of their political prowess proved to be a major obstacle. There was great deal of pressure from the populace for EDP to work together with the other opposition parties irrespective of major differences under the slogan that "unity is strength"; however we found that the disadvantages outweighed the benefits. From EDP's experiences, I have learned that the societal pressure of 'working together' prohibits parties with their own distinctive and clear agenda to stand on their own two feet.

Observations on the role of elections

Elections in Ethiopia are not playing the constructive role that it should play in any nation devoted to democracy-building. Elections in Ethiopia have been the source of new antagonism and conflicts rather than reflecting the people's will. Elections in Ethiopia are actually decreasing the space for multi-party system when in fact such a system should be strengthened with elections.

The first post-1991 elections passed without having any real meaning for two reasons; the government did not create a conducive environment for free and fair elections and many opposition parties boycotted the electoral process. The first participatory election was in 2000 and the opposition won only 12 seats out of 547 seats. The 2005 national elections were even more participatory than the previous and the opposition seats in parliament increased exponentially with over 170 seats. For the first time ever, the opposition won over the administration of the capital.

However, instead of building upon those achievements, due to our zero-sum thinking, these advances were reversed. In connection with the vote rigging committed by the ruling party, political unrest erupted which led to the loss of hundreds of lives. The main result of the 2005 elections was the public's loss of hope in democracy for two major reasons: the government stifling the post-election discontent with extreme force and the opposition boycotting the parliament and the Addis Ababa administration. As a result, in 2010 national elections, the opposition was only able to win one seat in the parliament and the country went back to a one-party rule system. Still to this day, neither the government nor the opposition have accepted that they have committed any wrongs. Currently, the government is boasting that their 99.6% seat-winning in 2010 was a true reflection of the people's decision and the opposition, on the other hand, claims that if the elections had been free and fair, the ruling party would not have won a single seat. Political parties in Ethiopia have not been able to get out of zero-sum thinking and to see that we are all are part of the problem and therefore need to be a part of the solution. For this reason, Ethiopia has to this day yet to see win-win solutions in the political arena. I believe that we have ultimately been defeated as a people.

Lessons learned

In closing, these seven lessons can summarize some of the key lessons that I have learned in my eighteen years as an opposition politician in Ethiopia:

- 1) The impact of ideological background and generational gap:** The current political elite were from the same generation and were mainly shaped by the Marxist-Leninism. This fact is part of the reason that a politics of tolerance has not been able to take root in Ethiopia.
- 2) Politics of enmity:** The government and opposition do not see each other as political rivals, but as enemies. Subsequently, the elections in Ethiopia have become the source of further animosity and conflicts rather than the expression of the people's will, particularly because the only option in enmity is total victory over your opponent.
- 3) All-encompassing democratic deficit:** Democracy-building has proven to be extremely complicated in Ethiopia because the lack of democratic culture and practices is not only prevalent in the government, but in the opposition and in the populace at large as discussed previously in the paper.

4) Danger of ethnic-based politics: Since most political parties have organized themselves along ethno-linguistic lines, the political competition has become unhealthy with an undue focus on identity over actual issues.

5) Absence of consensus on the means of political struggle: The concept of peaceful political struggle and electoral politics to bring about change has not gained enough momentum because of the prevailing thinking in Ethiopia that violent means are justified in the end towards acquiring and holding on to power.

6) One-party domination of public institutions : The fact that almost all public institutions such as the security apparatus, media, electoral organs and administrative structures are under the total control of the ruling party has created an uneven playing field for political parties.

7) The impact of the electoral system: The first-past-the-post electoral system (winner takes all) of the country has greatly contributed to one party domination and has severely lessened the chance for the opposition (and their constituencies) to be duly represented in the legislative bodies at all levels of government.

8) The impact of poverty and illiteracy on democracy-building: The vast majority of Ethiopian people have little disposable income and often feel that they have little to gain or lose in material terms because of an election result. Further, with the lack of education, many Ethiopians do not have sufficient analytical ability to distinguish between the programs of political parties. For these reasons, the populace's level of participation and ability to influence the political process is less effective.

Finally, though the current picture of the state of Ethiopia's democracy-building might seem gloomy, important developments are fermenting behind the scenes. A middle class is slowly beginning to emerge and over twenty million children and youth are being educated. With economic empowerment and generational change, democracy will in due time become an imperative rather than an option in Ethiopia.