

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

The following short paper is not a narrative of our history during the past four decades, neither it pretends to be so. There might even be some inconsistencies and omissions. It is strictly a personal view based on my own experience. I am simply trying to point out at circumstances in which time and spaces where favorable to make needed reforms and launch Ethiopia into high gear of development. The issue were clearly evident, the people and the country were ready for changes, what failed was constantly the leadership. I thought useful to raise the issue of failing leaderships, because I feel that the same phenomenon is being repeated at this most dramatic time of our history. For the sake of brevity I have used very broad-brush strokes to synthesize some very complex historical time, for which I hope to be forgiven.

Looking back into our history of the past fifty years, I cannot help thinking of the many occasions in which great opportunities opened for the development of our country, and were missed altogether. Particularly, if we compare our development with those countries that were at our level in 1950, for instance like South Korea and India. The countries are also two extremes in size and type of problems faced in their development. Obviously there are historical, cultural, social and physical differences between each country; the circumstances under which they have come to nationhood being also different, comparison can only be general, in terms of their relative conditions in 1950. Rather, than the political and economic circumstances under which their growth occurred, the human factors and the historical backgrounds of each country were most probably the main elements that have made the difference between our development and theirs.

Ethiopia's course to modernization happened in a series of shocks and jolts caused by wars and revolutions. These terrible happenings brought tremendous disruptions and convulsions in the socio-economic and political make up of the country; and yet, at same time opened new opportunities towards the rapid modernization of the country. The first most violent disruption came with the Italian invasion of the country. Until then Ethiopia's conditions in terms of modern facilities consisted the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway and the telephone system, installed during the reign of Emperor Menelik; other than that few modern amenities were available. Modern education was limited to Menelik School and a few missionary establishments. A sprinkling of foreign diplomatic missions from France, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Russia the United States and some Greek, Armenian, Indian, Arab traders and

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

religious missionaries constituted the foreign population. Development occurred following the railway line along which some towns had grown, principally Dire Dawa that was the central depot of the railway line, and at mid distance between Djibouti and Addis Ababa. Actually the journey the journey took three days, with overnight stops at Awash and Dire Dawa. Otherwise, the whole country existed in a general state comparable to those of 17th Century Europe. Trade was limited to some imports, firearms, textiles, yarns, spices and some light merchandise, and the export of some local products like coffee, hide and skins, beeswax, incense and civet. Other than the traditional crafts no manufacture and modern farming did exist.

Political and social life followed the traditional paradigm of Court politics, internal strife's, reconciliation's and so forth. There was no central administration of the country; governors were put in charge of each province, which they administered independently according to local customs and some general guidelines from the Crown. Their main responsibilities were to levy some taxes and mobilize some troops in case of war. They administered justice, however people had the right to appeal up to the Afe Negus (High Justice) and lastly to the Emperor himself. But for the customary laws there was no penal code, civil code and commercial code. Litigations with foreign citizens were handled by a special court in which sat a foreign representative.

When Emperor Haile Sellassie came to power, first as Regent then later as Emperor, contacts with the outside world accelerated. The Emperor had already some modern education and had visited Europe; he therefore had some modern notions and a vision of what he would do during his reign. Education was expanded, Teferi Makonnen School was opened, and scores of students were sent abroad to train in various skills. The first crop of Menelik school graduates had matured; some became members of the first Ministerial Cabinet. Commerce and exchange with outside world increased, missions were sent abroad more frequently. Bank notes were introduced as currency. A special effort was made to establish close relations with Japan, which was an oriental Monarchy with no colonial precedent. Ethiopia had become member of the League of Nation, the ILO and was signatory to various international treaties. All these efforts were merely embryonic, modernizing Ethiopia even by the standards of that

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

era, was a formidable task for which neither the human element nor the material resources were available. Thus, Ethiopia remained by a very large extent a medieval society and country.

A major factor that hampered Ethiopia's modern development was also foreign interference. Surrounded by colonial powers, Italy, France and Great Britain the defense of its freedom and sovereignty was the primary concern of the nation and its rulers. For centuries until the last 1935 Italian invasion of the country, attempts to disrobe it of its independence, interference and instigations in its domestic affairs was a constant challenge that had to be fought incessantly. This continuous alien provocation has instilled a suspicious and defensive state of mind to anything foreign in the Ethiopian psyche, which still persists to this day.

The Italian invasion was the first real break-up with Ethiopia's past. However valiant and heroic her people were, confronted against a modern mechanized army with tanks, airplanes, bombs and poison gas, betrayed by its allies and the League of Nation, Ethiopia suffered a horrible defeat. The Italians occupied the land, destroyed all institutions, exterminated and jailed the elite, especially the educated class and declared it a colony. The country was redistricted into five major provinces following some vague ethnic lines, a centralized administration was established and new laws were introduced. A network of roads was built around the country, necessitated by the needs necessary to sustain the occupying forces new businesses, industries and services grew. Prompted by Mussolini's ambitions to make of Ethiopia an exemplary colony, Italy made huge investments that were misspent in ill studied projects, and more than often stirred by corrupt officials and business circles. Notwithstanding the above, all this influx of modern methods and means, transformed the economy of the country and induced profound changes in the social fabric of the Ethiopian society.

When liberation came in 1941, the Imperial government did not inherit all the goods and amenities left by the Italian occupants, the colonial armed forces that were the major components of the Allied Forces that liberated Ethiopia, took away anything and everything

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

that was removable including household goods, as well as the Italian professional and technical labor force, which they used in Kenya and other colonies. What were left were the infrastructures and some immovable equipment. Thus, when taking over the country the Ethiopian Government had neither the funds nor the manpower to up-keep them. Anyway, the first priorities were to establish a functioning administration and establishing some control over the country, and getting the Allied forces out of Ethiopia. Which they evacuated with great reluctance, after reinstating Eritrea's and Italian Somalia's colonial status under British Administration, and keeping the Ogaden a reserved area for a period of ten years.

The fifteen years following the liberation were the most critical and most challenging for the Imperial Government, which could dispose of very limited number of trained manpower and scarce financial resources. Yet, it was a period of great achievements. What made it relatively easy was also the great character of the Ethiopian people, who always manage to keep some order by themselves in moments of crisis, and when the institution of the state is weakened or altogether absent. Starting from scratch Ministries, Internal Administration, National Central Bank and the currency, the Commercial Bank and whole range of government institutions were organized, laws and decrees promulgated, armed forces and the police formed and trained, law and order established. Education was expanded and hundreds of students were sent abroad. Internationally Ethiopia was playing fully her role as a member of the free world. We were founding members of the United Nations, signatories to Dumbarton Oak and founding members of the World Bank and IMF. Ethiopian armed forces had participated in the Korean War. Eritrea was reunited with the motherland. A revised Constitution was adopted in 1955. Ethiopia had proven to be a viable, responsible and dynamic member of the world community, with a promising future. Both the nation and her leadership enjoyed a tremendous prestige and approval around the world.

However, internally the enthusiasm and drive that had stimulated the post liberation period had started to fade; a certain smugness and indulgence had set in. Basking in the limelight of the world scene, the leadership failed to pay enough attention to the growing demands at home, and the socio-economic and political transformations that had developed inside the

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

country, because of the traumatic experiences of the past two decades. While in exile, the exposure acquired by the Emperor and the entourage that came to power after the liberation, was focused on the diplomatic and political struggle they had carried to regain recognition and freedom for the country. Aside their limited professional skills, there was little in their psychological and political makeup that prepared them to manage an ever expanding and explosive social and economic situations created by a foreign, nevertheless modern, economic and political system, which altered radically the Ethiopian way of life. Their prevailing outlook about the governance of the country was still anchored in the era prior to the Italian occupation, which they did not experience like the rest of the people, and of which they hardly could understand the impact on the society.

Thus, a tragic dichotomy began to take place. On one hand the government was poising a progressive stand, introducing and establishing new institutions and new laws and regulations; and on the other dragging its feet in making some serious reforms, particularly about land reform, the administration of the interior, freedom of expression, democratization and the like; instead the government was building more bureaucratic structures. Graduates had returned and were integrated in the administration. A quinquennial social and economic plan was adopted. The economy was stable; yet investments were slow and inadequate for the growing demand. Foreign investments were few, nor were they actively sought, the suspicion of the foreign element still persisted. Powerful driving personalities like Sheaf Teas Wolfe Giorgio, Maj. General Mulugeta Bully and others had faded from the political center. Court politics and intrigues dominated public life; all decision-making was highly centralized in the palace, which bogged down the workings of the state. Courtier-ship, opportunism and cronyism prevailed, in lieu of statesmanship. This period culminated with the attempted coup d'état of General Mengistu Neway, and the tragic killing of a substantial number of leaders, whose balancing role in the body politics was important. Thus, a period in which Ethiopia had the opportunity of making great advances towards modernization was lost.

After the abortive coup d'état, another window of opportunity had again opened to make some reasonable reforms. Cosmetic changes were made by extending some delegation of

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

power to the Prime Minister and some limited decision making power to the Ministers, little changed in the direction of the country. Power struggles and intrigues became the general modus-vivendi of the hierarchy, whilst, the country had advanced and was ahead of the state, which was ruling more by inertia than willed leadership. The attention of the Emperor was focused on foreign relations rather than on domestic affairs. The Prime Minister, who had an excellent grasp of foreign relations, had little flair for domestic affairs and did not possess the pungency and the compelling drive necessary to manage the Byzantine character of Ethiopian internal politics. Yet, the country had progressed substantially, business was flourishing, professional and skilled manpower had become available, a growing middle class had emerged, organic laws were in place, infrastructures were adequate, commercial farming had begun, economic growth was reasonable and steady, monetary stability and balance of trade was satisfactory. It could be said that in most aspects of socio-economic and political levels, Ethiopia had staggeringly reached a take-off stage. Unfortunately, shrouded in obscurity for lack of freedom expression and open public dialogue few, including the leadership, understood the profound and positive changes that had occurred in the nation.

With the advancing age of the Emperor and his reduced abilities to fulfill an ever demanding role, the power struggle amongst various power groups had intensified to a point where government was paralyzed. In short, the government had lost its grip on power, and its moral and political leadership of the nation. On the world scene, due to an increasing exposure to the outside world Ethiopia's problems had unraveled; the bright luster that had covered its image that far had also faded. Thus, when the 1974 Revolution took place, the general atmosphere was marred the pathos and bitterness caused by the famine in Wollo, and the overall apathy of the government's response in all aspects of public life, and a laissez faire attitude stimulated by a false sense of security. The pseudo-Marxist military who took power, partly because of sheer ignorance and partly imbued by revolutionary fervor of ideologies they barely understood in their real context, discarded everything that was built in the past and took the high road of absolute radical change, of which we all know the end results. Again, another opportunity for a constructive change was lost.

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

Mayhem and disruptions reigned for seventeen years during the military rule; the leadership was inept, uncouth and incapable of setting up the kind of governance required by the transformation of the society and its future development. The regime took sides in the cold war and alienated the world community that would have been most helpful for Ethiopia's development. Admittedly, all that happened during the military were not negative some positive achievements were made here and there, although they hardly impacted the overall deterioration of the country. A highly irrational and vicious conduct of public affairs had destroyed the values and fabrics of the society. Eventually, the revolution collapsed all together leaving the nation bankrupt and in disarray. The halfhearted measures made to redress the harm done, came too late and too little. Ethiopia suffered another big blow that belated gravely here development, and a great opportunity was lost.

The fall of the military regime brought to power the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) alliance, led by the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), another former Albanian-Marxist inspired group, that had turned overnight into a new born-democratic coalition. The Charter establishing the Transitional Government adopted integrally the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, promised a democratic governance, while it promoted an ethno-centric restructure of the country, including the right to secession. A new Constitution was to be drafted and submitted to the people for their approval. A small window of hope had opened, and the Ethiopian people viewed the new regime with some guarded optimism. The United States and Western Powers, with much more faith and enthusiasm, gave full political and economic support to the new ethno-centric regime. Billions of dollars in economic aid and development assistance were poured into Ethiopia. The infant Prime Minister of Ethiopia was labeled as one of the new 'democratic leaders' of Africa.

Ten years down the road, by their own admission, the regime turned out to be even more inefficient, incompetent, utterly virulent and riddled with corruption and cronyism from top to bottom. Blatant violations of Human Rights, fraudulent elections, arbitrary killings, illegal detentions, totalitarian rule, intolerance, lies and false promises have become its trademark.

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

Now days, abject poverty, disease, famine, ethnic disaffection, corruption and bad governance are the dominant features of Ethiopian life. The regime is collapsing because of its own failings, the country is rudderless with the prospect of an uncertain future. We are amongst the last three poorest countries in the world. Here again, another window of opportunity has been lost.

This said, the blame for all these failures should not lie solely on the regimes that have ruled the country at various times, the civil societies and particularly the educated elites that have emerged in the past four decades, must share partly the responsibility for these unfortunate occurrences. In the context of Ethiopia's historical journey of recent times, the positive role of the 'learned elite' has been more cosmetic rather than fundamental. It has failed to provide Ethiopia with a contemporary and visionary leadership. This is not denying the efforts and sacrifices made by many who tried their best for the good of country, neither to negate the existence of many genuine political movements. However, in the realm of politics facts are the only marketable currency. The hard facts are that no popular and strong national political movement and leadership have emerged to this date. For instance, at this point in time, when the collapse of the Woyane is irremediably imminent, no alternative party or political coalition can be observed. Again, the chances are that the momentum has past and the opportunity for change has been lost, and that short of some unpredictable act, the Woyane rule will continue for the foreseeable future.

Strangely enough an unfortunate streak seems to afflict our country. The more educated and capable people we have, the more technical and scientific advantage are available, the more resources and means are offered, the more the human elements fails and the country's conditions get worst.

Nevertheless, I do not see any grounds for despair. Our country is still rich and with plenty of resources, even if her problems look huge and insurmountable. On the contrary, I believe that we are in a much better and stronger position than ever to provide the country with a dynamic and dedicated leadership that is committed to a democratic and the just governance.

ETHIOPIA 1960-2001

A saga of lost opportunities

by Imru Zelleke

27 August 2001

However, our approach to our problems must be different than what has been so far the practice, in which the political dictum has been carried solely at the upper level, without much involvement of the people at large. It would be a propitious time for civil societies to enter the political arena, and play their legitimate role in building the future of their country. In as much as the political parties are exponent of their programs, the Citizens, who are likely to vote them to power, must have their rights protected unequivocally and not be subject to the vagaries of political deals.

I have a fervent hope that a new page will commence from this conference, and that a new impetuous and a new consciousness, that transcends all the puny personal and political problems that have been a stumbled blocks, will arise in Ethiopian political life, AND THAT ANOTHER WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY WILL NOT BE MISSED.

I shall introduce some concrete suggestions later in the discussions.

With my most sincere wishes for a successful conference. Respectfully.

Imru Zelleke
(Former Ambassador of Ethiopia, Ret.)