

## Issue #4



## Horn of Africa Bulletin

### Transitions in the Horn: Between Optimism and Caution



The November-December 2018 issue of the Horn of Africa Bulletin (HAB) on political transitions is broaching one of the most critical and contemporary political developments in the region. Over the course of 2018, the HAB has tried to generate perspectives and create the space for debate on key politico-security dynamics in the region as exemplified by the March-April 2018 issue focusing on maritime security dynamics and the July-August issue titled, “Imagining Peace: Ethio-Eritrean Rapprochement”. The HAB editorial committee has demonstrated commendable determination to ensure that the HAB remain topical and relevant, both through its choice of themes, and by striving to provide space for a diverse range of perspectives on issues.

The recent political transformation in Ethiopia and the rapprochement process between Eritrea and Ethiopia have generated immense media coverage and attention from a wide range of actors. The optimism and enthusiasm generated by the transformation within Ethiopia and more generally in the region have raised expectations of a democratic transition in the most populous country in the Horn and hopes for enhanced inter-state peace and stability. The international community, going beyond verbal expressions of support, has also committed considerable financial resources to lend support to economic stabilization and developmental efforts in Ethiopia.<sup>1</sup>

The articles in this issue of the HAB focus on current transitions in the Horn. Inevitably, three out of four articles focus on Ethiopia, with one article addressing the potential for political transition in Uganda. The jointly authored article by Ferras and Bach addresses the interface between the momentous political developments in Ethiopia and shifting regional dynamics in the Horn. Their article also analyses the prospects for the upcoming local and national elections in Ethiopia and presents several possible scenarios. The ambitious scope of the article by Ferras and Bach

and their exploration of the linkages and dialectic between internal political dynamics in Ethiopia and larger shifts in inter-state and regional relations will be very useful and interesting reading for analysts seeking to understand and make sense of current events.

Noah's article on the prospects and potential pathways to a transition in Uganda is insightful in its exploration of transition in a country poorly explored when speaking about the Horn as well as its focus on the youth dimension to transitions.. The article argues that the extreme personalization of power in the Ugandan context has weakened key state institutions (such as the judiciary, the legislature and security apparatus) and paradoxically also rendered the possibility of a 'pacted' transition highly unlikely.Noah's article is also highly pertinent in discussing an increasingly important trend across the Horn, in the form of the emergence of new political movements with a youthful leadership and animated by youth activism. The article discusses the movement led by Kyagulanyi Ssentamu better known as 'Bobi Wine' and showcases the potential for political change, led by and embedded in the youth.

Gebissa's article is a panoramic and comprehensive overview of the key issues and challenges that may obstruct or roll back the current wave of political change in Ethiopia. His article should be mandatory reading for all those with a stake in understanding of the current transition in Ethiopia and who envisage a role for themselves in driving or facilitating the process. Gebissa argues that the current transition is an invaluable opportunity and that failure risks plunging the country into conflict, which necessitates urgent action in several spheres such as electoral reform, the revitalization of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) administration, reform of the judiciary and the security apparatus and shifts in economic policy.

The final article in this issue of the HAB by Daba focuses on the role of faith-based organizations in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Ethiopia. The article argues that faith-based institutions in Ethiopia are uniquely well placed to take the initiative in conflict resolution and reconciliation activities. The author argues that while they were not able to fulfil their potential in the past, the new political context in Ethiopia and the recent spate of conflicts presents another opportunity for faith-based organizations.

The complexity and unpredictability of transitions has tended to generate more questions than answers. Transitions have varied so much in terms of the precise concatenations of drivers, participants and sequencing of events, that theorization and generalizations invariably lag behind reality. This is a point that has also been alluded to in two articles of this issue of the HAB. Conventional transitology often assumes an implicit teleology in expecting a single end-point i.e. liberal democracy. The possibility of open-ended transitions or reversals is not widely acknowledged. A

very similar criticism also points to another implicit assumption that transitions are inevitable.

Radical political ruptures are polarizing and destabilizing by definition and recent events in Ethiopia and the Horn are no exception. However, a striking aspect of the dominant discourse and narratives on the current transition in Ethiopia and the recent shifts in inter-state relations in the Horn is the tendency to marginalize or react defensively to critical voices and perspectives. Critique and opposition have often been equated with support for the previous power-holders which has had the unintended consequence of downplaying or ignoring evidence (in the form of events and dynamics) that do not fit pre-conceived expectations or biases.

The conventional narrative often emphasizes the positive in terms of the political transition in Ethiopia and the larger region but often at the expense of downplaying the implications of several worrying developments in the form of heightened ethnic and political polarization in Ethiopia, rising tensions and frequency of local level inter-ethnic clashes which have led to the displacement of millions.

Similar to transition experiences in the rest of the world, legal reforms to open up the political-civic space are a central component of the current transition in Ethiopia. Institutions have also been revamped (the Ministry of Peace) and the Ethiopian government has issued draft legislation to create new institutions such as the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC). While there is no denying the need for reconciliation and mediation efforts to deescalate emerging tensions and clashes and in the longer term bridge political divides, decisions such as the establishment of the NPRC could have benefitted from wider consultations with the public regarding their remit and activities. It should also be pointed out that the emphasis on reconciliation clashes with other imperatives such as the politically expedient pattern of selectively arresting and charging high ranking officials in the state apparatus for human rights abuses and corruption. The argument could be made that the future of the transition may very well depend on how consistently the government adopts reconciliation as a strategy for defusing political tensions.

The articles by Noah and Gebissa share a similarity in seeing the economic dissatisfaction of the youth as a driver for transitions in the Horn. Gebissa's article also recommends shifts in economic policy that would more directly focus on employment creation for youth as a necessary measure and also commends the abandonment of the 'developmental state model'. The articles by these authors do not ignore the economic dimension but there is an overarching omission (also shared on the part of mainstream media and analysis of the transition in the Ethiopia and Horn), that is the elephant in the room. The transition in Ethiopia has been accompanied by the abandonment of the 'developmental state' model and the commitment to widespread privatizations and economic liberalization, a state of affairs which paradoxically has not generated any public debates or discussions.<sup>ii</sup>

What is surprising is also that this shift in economic policy is happening, fully two decades after the neo-liberal wave had crested globally.

Readers of the HAB will find the articles in this issue highly relevant and topical especially in regard to the current political situation in the Horn, and potentially also useful analysis regarding windows of opportunity to support the transition across the Horn.

**Demessie Fantaye**, Editor

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<sup>i</sup> Most recently the government of Denmark signed a grant agreement with the Ethiopian government for an amount totaling 135 million Danish Kroner to support the Ethiopia government's efforts to address the refugee crisis and also to support the rural safety net program. This follows similar agreements with the governments of the United States, United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The World Bank has also concluded a substantial grant agreement with the Ethiopian government.

<sup>ii</sup> In a statement issued on June 5, 2018, the executive committee of the ruling coalition in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) committed to widespread partial and complete privatizations of several state-owned enterprises.

## Donnons du temps au temps ! Abiy Ahmed 2018 : le temps des ajustements internes et régionaux

By Dr Jean-Nicolas Bach, Patrick Ferras



Comme nous l'avions indiqué il y a quelques mois, un Premier ministre éthiopien se devait de tenter de trouver une solution à la situation de « *ni paix ni guerre* » qui subsistait avec son voisin érythréen<sup>[i]</sup>. Force est de constater que le prédécesseur de Abiy Ahmed, Hailemariam Desalegn<sup>[ii]</sup>, n'a pas brillé dans ce domaine malgré une tentative de rapprochement entreprise avec Asmara à la fin de son mandat. Quant à la situation qu'il laisse après six années à la tête de l'exécutif, elle est relativement médiocre : malgré quelques avancées économiques indéniables, les problèmes sécuritaires à l'intérieur du pays n'ont jamais été aussi élevés depuis 1991<sup>[iii]</sup>, l'inflation n'a pas été enrayer, et la dévaluation récente de la monnaie va peser sur le pouvoir d'achat des ménages déjà vulnérables. Désigné par l'ancien Premier ministre Meles Zenawi (1995-2012) pour occuper ce poste, il avait été maintenu à bout de bras par la coalition au pouvoir (EPRDF : *Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front*) jusqu'à sa démission en février 2018. Cette période de « transition » a pris fin avec la nomination de Abiy Ahmed en avril 2018,

une bonne partie de la classe politique ayant ainsi validé la sortie de l'ère post-Meles. L'arrivée d'un nouveau Premier ministre inconnu du grand public il y a encore six mois, est un signe de renouveau non négligeable d'autant qu'il a su d'entrée mettre en œuvre de bonnes résolutions. S'appuyant sur une stratégie de communication inédite en Éthiopie par sa célérité et son efficacité, il a déroulé tous ses adversaires jusqu'à ses opposants au sein de la coalition au pouvoir. Néanmoins, plusieurs signes et la réalité sur le terrain poussent à la prudence quant aux changements annoncés. Nous proposons dans ce texte d'articuler quelques implications majeures de ces mesures entre le niveau régional (vis-à-vis de l'Érythrée et de Djibouti) et intérieur (notamment à l'égard de certains groupes d'opposition).

### **Le rapprochement Éthiopie – Érythrée**

Dans les semaines qui ont suivi son arrivée à la tête de l'exécutif, Abiy a réalisé une véritable ouverture sur la scène politique interne en normalisant les relations avec les opposants et en libérant les opposants jusque-là considérés comme des « ennemis ». Des camps d'internement et des centres de tortures ont ainsi été fermés, des opposants politiques libérés, et l'appel au retour au pays des opposants armés entendu : des figures majeures de *l'Oromo Liberation Front* et de *Ginbot 7* sont ainsi rentrées à Addis-Abeba durant l'été, ouvrant une nouvelle ère politique en Éthiopie. Des discussions sont également en cours avec *l'Ogaden National Liberation Front* (ONLF).

En politique extérieure, la grande réussite d'Abiy Ahmed à court terme concerne bien sûr le réchauffement des relations avec Asmara<sup>[iv]</sup>. Ce rapprochement est révélateur d'une Éthiopie relativement affaiblie en politique étrangère ces dernières années en raison d'une présence étrangère croissante (route chinoise de la soie, États du Golfe arabe, et plus récemment la Russie). Renouer avec Asmara, c'est donc aussi revenir à l'initiative diplomatique dans la région. Si la rapidité avec laquelle ce rapprochement a eu lieu a surpris, les réactions populaires ont montré que la paix entre les deux États était quant à elle attendue. Saluée par tous, cette paix est d'abord due à la bonne volonté des deux États d'en finir avec une situation possible de confrontation. Le réchauffement entre les deux États a été facilité par certains partenaires extérieurs ou facilitateurs (comme les Émirats arabes unis, l'Arabie Saoudite ou les États-Unis), mais l'Éthiopie et l'Érythrée sont restés maîtres des initiatives et des décisions.. Et l'initiative devait venir de l'Éthiopie puisque la non application de la décision de la commission de la démarcation de la frontière (2002) était de son fait. Le président Issaias Aferworki a saisi la balle au bond.

Ce rapprochement soulève en revanche des doutes sur la capacité de l'Union africaine (UA) et de l'Autorité intergouvernementale pour le développement (IGAD) à agir en tant que facilitateurs de paix. Si Mahamat Faki, le président actuel de la Commission de l'Union africaine, a salué le réchauffement des relations entre les

deux États, il n'a pas été à l'origine de quelconques initiatives depuis son début de mandat, pas plus que ne l'avait été Madame Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, sa prédécesseur. Notons d'ailleurs que l'accord de paix a été signé à Djeddah sous l'égide de l'Arabie saoudite[\[v\]](#) ! Cet épisode rappelle que les deux États ne s'appuient que rarement sur des Communautés économiques régionales ou une organisation continentale.

Les événements sont ensuite allés très vite : les vols ont rapidement repris entre Asmara et Addis-Abeba, la frontière terrestre désormais ouverte laisse passer commerçants et familles – sans qu'aucun cadre n'ait encore été défini pour organiser la reprise des mouvements financiers, économiques et humains entre les pays. Or, le défaut des règles encadrant ces circulations entre les deux pays (utilisation du port, taxes, douanes, rapports monétaires) était précisément aux racines de la guerre de 1998-2000, et non la question frontalière. De très nombreuses annonces ont été faites dans le sens d'une redéfinition de ces échanges, mais des problèmes majeurs restent à régler et il faudra trouver rapidement des compromis. La démilitarisation et la démarcation de la zone contestée, l'utilisation des ports, les migrations, les problèmes liées aux monnaies ne sont que quelques éléments qui laissent penser qu'il faudra plusieurs mois pour voir la véritable fin du tunnel. Il faut donc rester prudent quant aux annonces et aux réalités visibles sur le terrain. L'Ethiopie n'a jamais réellement perdu de vue l'accès aux ports érythréens, et les Erythréens veilleront pour leur part à ne pas devenir un dixième État-région de l'Éthiopie.

### **Le renouveau éthiopien secoue Djibouti**

La petite république de Djibouti, surprise par les initiatives de son grand voisin, semble déstabilisée. Sa position était déjà perturbée par les retombées de la guerre au Yémen et le blocus imposé par la coalition menée par l'Arabie saoudite sur le Qatar. En effet, les investissements émiratis en Érythrée dans le cadre de la guerre au Yémen, et le retrait des troupes qatariennes de la frontière érythréenne suite à l'alignement de Djibouti sur l'Arabie saoudite dans la crise du Qatar, avaient déjà redéfini la position de l'État dans la région. De plus, Djibouti, cité portuaire et principal accès à la mer de l'Éthiopie, était en lutte depuis plusieurs mois avec Dubaï World Port suite à la décision de retirer à cette entreprise émirati la gestion du terminal de conteneurs de Doraleh – Djibouti accusant la société émiratie de sous-exploiter ce secteur du port. Mais il ne faut pas s'attendre à une véritable déstabilisation, à terme, Djibouti pouvant bénéficier encore plusieurs années de ses rentes structurelles. La réactivation des ports érythréens par l'Éthiopie et le développement du port de Berbera au Somaliland (opéré par Dubaï World Port et l'Éthiopie) ne concurrencera d'ailleurs Djibouti qu'à un horizon de cinq ans car tout est à reconstruire en Érythrée[\[vi\]](#) et le Somaliland fait face à de nombreux problèmes financiers.

Abritant le siège de l'IGAD, la communauté économique de la Corne de l'Afrique, Djibouti va néanmoins devoir ajuster sa politique régionale suite à cette concurrence pour son activité majeure liée au transport maritime (importations et exportations éthiopiennes). Djibouti se rapproche par exemple à nouveau de la France, longtemps délaissée au profit de nouveaux investisseurs (Chinois) et acteurs militaires (États-Unis). De plus, une nouvelle configuration portuaire va s'installer dans la région, découlant en partie des évolutions politiques internes en Éthiopie et de la redéfinition attendue des relations entre la capitale éthiopienne et ses provinces. Sur ce point, la perspective de décentralisation et de dévolution des pouvoirs aux Régions-États devrait s'opérer à travers trois axes dirigés au Nord vers l'Érythrée (Tigray et Afar), à l'Est vers Djibouti (région centrale de l'Éthiopie) et au Sud-Est vers le Somaliland. Les tensions entre les Émirats arabes unis et Djibouti au sujet du port de Doraleh (Djibouti) risquent quant à eux de perdurer malgré la décision de Djibouti de nationaliser le terminal, leurs investissements à Berbera et en Érythrée (Assab notamment) donnant lieu à un sentiment de *containement* à Djibouti. Cette dernière, qui s'était satisfaite de son lien privilégié avec l'Éthiopie et de la faiblesse de ses voisins, pourrait éprouver quelques difficultés à revenir sur le devant de la scène régionale même si elle bénéficie des structures les plus avancées et de bases (qu'elles soient militaires ou économiques) assez solides pour demeurer un îlot de stabilité incontournable dans la région à moyen terme.

### **Un enjeu majeur : les élections éthiopiennes de 2019 et 2020**

Si l'ouverture de la scène politique initiée par Abiy Ahmed a surpris par son ampleur et sa rapidité, son premier objectif reste de remporter les élections locales de 2019 et les élections générales de 2020. Le dernier congrès de l'EPRDF qui s'est tenu en octobre 2018 a entériné son leadership à la quasi-unanimité et les préparatifs peuvent désormais commencer dans cette perspective importante (voire déterminante) pour l'EPRDF.

Pour l'instant, les oppositions éprouvent certaines difficultés à se faire entendre non seulement parce qu'elles ont été anesthésiées par les offensives des gouvernements précédents, mais aussi parce que le nouveau Premier ministre occupe largement l'espace médiatique. Les partis d'opposition vont ainsi être contraints d'adapter leur stratégie de communication s'ils veulent remporter des sièges dans les administrations régionales en 2019 et des sièges de députés en 2020, et plus largement s'ils souhaitent conquérir l'opinion publique dont semble largement bénéficier pour le moment Abiy Ahmed. Le renouveau, la paix et la démocratisation qu'il appelle par ses discours semble en effet bien accueilli par de nombreux Ethiopiens heureux d'entendre des engagements, et de constater qu'il n'hésite pas à renvoyer ceux qui ne vont pas dans le sens de sa politique.

Malgré ces succès initiaux, le nouveau Premier ministre devra livrer une compétition politique qui s'annonce extrêmement rude face à deux oppositions pour l'instant distinctes : l'une ethno-nationale (Oromo pour sa partie la plus significative), l'autre multinationale (largement ancrée en région Amhara et dans la capitale)[vii]. Ces deux branches d'opposition sont soumises à des reconfigurations profondes, toutes deux contraintes d'ajuster leur position suite au retour des oppositions armées invitées par le Premier ministre à rentrer au pays et à agir dans le cadre des règles de la compétition électorale. Depuis septembre 2018, quelques mois seulement après la nomination d'Abiy à la tête de l'exécutif, l'Oromo Liberation Front et *Ginbot 7*, mouvements considérés jusque-là comme terroristes par le gouvernement éthiopien et condamnés comme tels par la justice éthiopienne, ont ainsi été accueillis en grande pompe à Addis-Abeba. Un mouvement qui s'est accompagné de la libération des activistes de ces groupes en Éthiopie. Au sein de la branche multinationale éthiopienne, *Ginbot 7* négocie notamment avec le Parti Bleu (*Semayawi Parti*), au détriment des partis plus conservateurs de cette même branche, tels que All-Ethiopia Unity Party. D'autres partis seront sans doute partie-prenant dans les négociations dont l'objectif semble la création d'un nouveau grand parti représentant cette branche et capable de faire face à l'EPRDF aux prochaines élections.

Du côté de la branche ethno-nationale, et plus spécifiquement oromo, il est encore trop tôt pour percevoir les reconfigurations en cours. Le retour de l'OLF en Éthiopie semble avoir suscité un engouement populaire dans les provinces oromo, mais en dépit de la multiplication des drapeaux de l'OLF, le soutien populaire reste très difficile à évaluer. Les héritiers de l'OLF appartiennent en effet à plusieurs générations (de Lencho Lata, l'un des fondateurs de l'OLF, à Jawar Mohamed, jeune nationaliste ambitieux, allié de circonstance d'Abiy) et plusieurs choix stratégiques risquent de les diviser dans la perspective des prochaines élections : faire alliance avec les ethno-nationalistes modérés représentés par *Medrek* (Front créé à la veille des élections de 2010 auquel appartient notamment Merera Gudina), ou répondre à l'attraction de l'EPRDF/ODM en surfant sur la vague Abiy.

Des reconfigurations politiques majeures sont donc en cours et malgré la difficulté à percevoir clairement les réalignements jusqu'au local, deux grands scenarii (très schématiques) sont envisageables. Le premier est relatif à la poursuite de la normalisation de la vie politique. Une décentralisation confirmée par les élections locales de 2019 permettrait dans un premier temps aux partis d'opposition d'accroître leur marge d'action et la représentativité des élites dans les provinces, enclenchant ainsi une normalisation de la vie politique tout en dessinant un contexte favorable à la sortie des anciennes élites de l'État désormais marginalisées (les élites politiques et économiques tigréennes se repliant dans le Nord). Les partis d'oppositions entreraient ainsi en politique et pourraient enfin expérimenter l'exercice du pouvoir, une première depuis 1995 (hormis une parenthèse limitée entre 2005 et 2010), et condition indispensable à une éventuelle

transition politique véritable à terme. Le second scenario, disons pessimiste, verrait se déchirer les opposants entre radicaux et modérés. Les premiers engendreraient une réaction violente du gouvernement qui en profiterait pour refermer la scène politique et enfermer à nouveau les opposants qui n'auraient pas « su saisir leur chance » lorsque la main leur tendue par l'EPRDF. Les modérés s'en trouveraient à nouveau affaiblis et bénéficieraient néanmoins de quelques sièges au Parlement, permettant à l'EPRDF de sauver la face du régime vis-à-vis de la communauté internationale. On pourrait alors, dans de telles circonstances, s'attendre à une reprise des violences dans les régions (surtout Amhara et Oromo, mais aussi au Tigray et au Sud), dont l'ampleur dépasserait celles des dernières années – des conflits ne s'alignant pas seulement sur des lignes ethniques mais intra-ethniques.

## Conclusion

Il va falloir du temps avant que le nouvel axe Éthiopie – Érythrée ne se consolide. La probable fin de l'embargo sur l'Érythrée qui devrait être décidée en novembre par le Conseil de sécurité des Nations unies enverra un message clair et qui devrait être entendu par l'ensemble du continent. Les États doivent se responsabiliser et compter sur eux-mêmes pour trouver des issues aux conflits, ce que Paul Kagamé énonçait il y a peu de temps en ces termes : « L'Afrique n'a pas besoin de *babysitters* ». En moins de quatre mois, de nombreuses annonces ont été faites de part et d'autre de la frontière entre l'Éthiopie et l'Érythrée. Il reste maintenant à les convertir en faits perceptibles par la population, car du règlement du conflit et de ses causes profondes (non résolues) dépend la stabilité de la région.

En Éthiopie, Abyi Ahmed représente un espoir qui ne faiblit pas. L'enthousiasme avec lequel ses propositions sont accueillies lors de ses discours souligne l'ampleur des attentes des Ethiopiens. Mais la reprise de l'activité économique et les retombées concrètes des résultats positifs vont nécessiter du temps. Parallèlement, la fin de la période post-Meles incarnée par les mandats d'Hailemariam Desalegn annonce une reconfiguration profonde de la scène politique et partisane.

Dr Jean-Nicolas Bach et Dr Patrick Ferras

Jean-Nicolas Bach est docteur en sciences politiques (2011) de Sciences Po Bordeaux-LAM. Il a beaucoup travaillé sur la politique éthiopienne et la Corne de l'Afrique en tant que coordonnateur du Observatoire de l'Afrique de l'Est (CEDEJ Khartoum – CERI Sciences Po). Il est actuellement directeur de l'institut de recherche français au Soudan. , CEDEJ Khartoum (CNRS-MEAE USR 3123). Son adresse email est [jeannicolas.bach@cedejkhartoum.com](mailto:jeannicolas.bach@cedejkhartoum.com).

Patrick Ferras a effectué la totalité de sa carrière militaire comme officier renseignement au sein d'unités et d'états-majors de l'Armée de l'air et Interarmées.

Il est docteur en géographie spécialité géopolitique de l'Université de Paris 8 (Institut français de géopolitique). Il dirige l'Observatoire de la Corne de l'Afrique ([www.csba-ferras.eu](http://www.csba-ferras.eu)).

[i] Ferras Patrick. "Ethiopie: les forces de défense nationale à la manœuvre.", <http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/observatoire-de-l-afrigue-de-l-est>, 06/2017.

[ii] Premier ministre de la mort de Meles Zenawi en 2012, jusqu'à sa démission en février 2018.

[iii] Depuis le début des manifestations en 2014, des centaines de manifestants et activistes ont été tués par les forces de l'ordre et des milliers enfermés. Le nouveau Premier ministre a mis fin à cette politique gouvernementale répressive depuis son arrivée au pouvoir.

[iv] Bulletin de juillet-août 2018 de *Life and Peace Institut*.

[v] Cet accord fait suite à la Déclaration conjointe de paix et d'amitié signée en juillet 2018.

[vi] Wodojo Kejela Anene, *Ethiopian Business*, 15 octobre 2018, pp. 57-58.

[vii] Bach, Jean-Nicolas. "Les élections générales de 2015, un drame en trois actes pour l'opposition libérale multinationale.", *Critique internationale*, no. 76 (juillet-septembre 2017) : p. 147-165.

## The Quest for a Peaceful Political Transition in Uganda: The National Dialogue is Only the First Step

By Tumwebaze Noah



### Abstract

Whereas in liberal democratic political systems, the political party in power can be stronger than the individual leader, in Uganda's case the president wields more power than the ruling party. In fact, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) political party is more of a one-man project not least because of the marginalization of many of the freedom fighters since 1986. President Museveni is also still the party chairperson of the NRM since 1986. This essay argues that the political transition in Uganda has failed to take off because of two major reasons. First, the process is not backed by forces that are greater than President Museveni to pressurize the president into considering transition. Secondly, the current president does not feel the pressure or the need to engage in political transition talks because he does not see how he gains from the process more than he is currently gaining from being the president. Therefore, all efforts to have a discussion on political

transition in Uganda have been futile in so far as the power structure in Uganda is either uninterested or unwilling to consider the possibility of a political transition.

### **Political transitions in Uganda**

Uganda has yet to experience a peaceful transfer of political power since independence in 1962. When Uganda gained independence in 1962, the Kabaka of Buganda, Sir Edward Mutesesa II became the president and Milton Obote the prime minister. On 24<sup>th</sup> May 1966, Obote sent army units to invade the Palace of King Mutesesa, forced him into exile and assumed the office of president and commander in chief.<sup>[i]</sup> Obote ruled till 1971 when his army commander, General Idi Amin Dada took over power in a military coup when he was attending a commonwealth meeting in Singapore.<sup>[ii]</sup> Amin then ruled for eight turbulent years and after his fall in 1979, Professor Yusuf Lule and Godfrey Lukongwa Binaisa had short tenures in office, each leaving the office unceremoniously. In 1980, Uganda held the highly disputed elections that ushered in Obote for the second time.<sup>[iii]</sup> He ruled till July 1985 when his army general, Tito Okello Lutwa overthrew him and assumed his office. His rule was marked by a conflict involving several insurgent movements and in January 1986, Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Army (NRA) took over power.

As Obama noted in his speech at the AU in 2015, Africa needs strong institutions not strong men.<sup>[iv]</sup> However, in the case of Uganda, we have strong men and not strong institutions. President Museveni has overshadowed the institutions of the country so that all the gains by the NRM in its 32 years reign rest on “fragile foundations.”<sup>[v]</sup> In other words, in a bid to control the institutions in Uganda, President Museveni has made these institutions weak, be it the judiciary, parliament and the security apparatus. For instance, the 10<sup>th</sup> parliament (2016-21) has a total of 447 members of parliament (MPs) who are mandated to vote. The NRM has over 303 MPs and over 66 Independent MPs leaning towards the NRM party,<sup>[vi]</sup> more than three quarters of the national parliament. The president takes advantage of his party’s big numbers to maintain a strong grip on the nation’s parliament which has led to the passing of controversial laws such as the Public Order Management Act 2013 and most recently the constitutional amendment to remove the age limit in December 2017. In total, by the end of 2017, over 65 articles have been amended in the Constitution of Uganda since 1995, the year when the constitution was promulgated.<sup>[vii]</sup> These constitutional amendments delay political transition in Uganda, first with the removal of term limits in 2005 and removal age limit in 2017, paving way for President Museveni to stand again in 2021.

All these constitutional amendments have been characterized by controversy and violence,<sup>[viii]</sup> leading to questions as to who actually benefits from the amendments. Such constitutional amendments in favor of the incumbent president have also successfully happened in Chad, Algeria, Sudan, Gambia, Zimbabwe, Congo Brazzaville, Rwanda and Eritrea. There have been unsuccessful attempts to this

effect in Burundi and Burkina Faso but with dire consequences. The NRM's inability to adhere to the very constitution that was made under its regime is one of the reasons delaying political transition in Uganda.

It can be argued that the political environment in Uganda is as much a product of the NRM regime as it is a result of international politics. In a way the government in Uganda has positioned itself to be a formidable player in the politics and security of the East and Horn of Africa. Knowingly or unknowingly, this has also placed the Ugandan government in a position to not only influence but also be influenced by the international community on the governance and security affairs of the region. Achille Mbembe has argued that the international community in its efforts to be a global proponent of democracy has ended up creating centralized despotisms and undemocratic systems of control even in cases where they are strongly in denial.[\[ix\]](#) This is visible in the case of Uganda.

Other scholars have argued that the history of Ugandan society including the post-colonial period is embedded in violence leading all political transitions to be affected by violence.[\[x\]](#) All successive regimes resorted to the use of violence to control the social, economic and political spheres of society since Uganda's independence in 1962. Arguably, the NRM used violence to propel itself to power though with a promise to deliver a democratic, participatory and inclusive governance leading some critics to argue that only violence can usher in a political transition in Uganda. [\[xi\]](#) They argue that the NRM government having come to power through use of violence, only understands the language of violence.[\[xii\]](#)

Nevertheless, during the early life of the NRM regime, there were efforts to ensure that the emerging political dispensation acquired democratic credentials. For instance, the making of the 1995 constitution of Uganda was praised for its widely consultative and inclusive nature. [\[xiii\]](#) The 1995 constitution had two 'safety valves' to ensure a rupture from past political practices and which also spoke to the modalities of incumbency and transfer of political power. The first was article 105 of the constitution that specified the two-term limit of 5 years each for the president. Term limits were meant deter the tendency for incumbents to extend their term in office as exemplified by former president Idi Amin.[\[xiv\]](#) This article of the constitution was scrapped through a constitutional amendment in 2005. The second one was Article 102(b) of the constitution that barred people over the age of 75 years from contesting for the office of the president. This too was also amended in December 2017, though during the same constitutional amendment the two-term limit for the office of the president was re-instated.

The NRM regime has consistently and progressively become intolerant of political dissent, even within its own party. For instance during the caucus meeting at Kyankwanzi in 2015, Evelyn Anite, a young NRM MP representing Koboko Municipality read a motion that sought to front President Museveni as NRM's frag

bearer in the 2016 elections. During the meeting, Anite obviously working at the behest of president Museveni warned “leaders within the party with presidential ambitions from pursuing schemes that compromise cohesion, unity, breed factionalism...”[\[xv\]](#) The message was directed at Amama Mbabazi, an NRM veteran, then prime minister as well as General Secretary for the NRM party for nursing presidential ambitions. He would later break away from the NRM and contest for the president in 2016 on an independent ticket. This intolerance is also reflected in the long list of people that have broken ties with the NRM for holding views contrary to those of president Museveni include Col Kiiza Besigye, Amany Mushega, Miria Matembe, Bidandi Ssali, General David Sejusa, etc.[\[xvi\]](#) The state is now maintained by use of force and violence with little room for dialogue despite many calls for an honest and inclusive discussion on the future of Uganda.

One of such calls for a national dialogue was issued by the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) and elders under the auspices of The Elders' Forum Uganda (TEFU)[\[xvii\]](#). However Ugandans have held dialogues for political transition before though with less success. One instance is the Uganda constitutional conference in Lancaster, London in 1961 that laid the ground for Uganda's independence in 1962. The Moshi Conference held in Tanzania in 1979 among Ugandan exiles led to the ouster Idi Amin, and the Nairobi Peace talks in 1985 followed the overthrow of Obote II's government.[\[xviii\]](#) Though the call issued by the TEFU carries it with the promise of making this a consultative and participatory process for all Ugandans, one cannot help but be skeptical about the ability of the current regime to have an honest conversation given the absence of a pushing force or fear of imminent danger if dialogue is not given a chance.

### **People Power Movement: Force for Political Transition?**

The current push for political transition in Uganda is manifested under the people power movement which is hinged on article 1 of the constitution of the republic of Uganda which states that “power belongs to the people”. The people power movement is led by the Hon. Kyagulanyi Ssentamu aka Bobi Wine. He is popularly referred to as “Ghetto President” alluding to his humble origins in the slums of Kamwokya and his later rise to become one of the most popular musicians in Uganda and East Africa in general. He is now a Member of Parliament for Kyadondo East and a popular politician. At the age of 36 and having joined politics not more than 2 years ago, Hon. Kyagulanyi is seen as the face for the people power movement though the movement is led by other young people in parliament especially those from Uganda's opposition.

Hon. Kyagulanyi has been criticized for being young, politically inexperienced, and inarticulate. He is also criticized for having no clear plan for Uganda. Ironically however, it could be argued that it is these very criticisms that constitute his strong points as far as his supporters the majority of whom are youth are concerned.

Uganda is the most youthful country in East Africa with a median age estimated at about 16 years, and about 80 % of the population below the age of 35 years.[\[xix\]](#) The rhetoric of NRM's role in liberating Uganda and the deployment of statistics by the NRM government comparing Uganda in 1986 with the present, is increasingly rejected by Ugandan youth. The youth are craving for something new and detached from the old regime. Hon Kyagulanyi offers this opportunity to move on from a political system dominated by the old generation of leaders and "revolutionaries" or "freedom fighters" as they fondly refer to themselves.

It should be noted that this is not the first time that politicians in Uganda have called for a popular movement to oust the NRM regime. Col Kiiza Besigye has always sought to educate the general populace about their rights, their freedoms, calling them to rise up and recognize that "power belongs to the people" as the constitution of Uganda reads. The Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) current manifesto (2016-2021) is hinged on the tenets of democracy, popular participation, accountability and rule of law. However, the opposition in Uganda and Besigye in particular has only appealed to a particular class of people especially the educated middle class and urban dwellers. Unlike the majority of people in rural areas who are comfortable in their situation and are not willing to exchange peace and security that the NRM regime offers for the principles of democracy, rule of law and accountability.

People power is an idea that has been popularized by social media and therefore widely spread among the youth, the urban dwellers and those that can access social media. Therefore, just like the other efforts to mobilize Ugandans before, the people power movement lacks sustainability and a clear roadmap on how to capture and retain power, which suggests that this movement is bound to pass without necessarily making any long impact on Ugandan politics.

In order to impact on the political transition process in Uganda, the people power movement needs to align itself either as a party or part of the already existing political parties in Uganda such as the Democratic Party (DP), Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) or Uganda People's Congress (UPC). Alternatively, Hon. Kyagulanyi who is the face of the movement can align himself with a political party. There is also a need to include the older generation of leaders in opposition so that the movement gains knowledge and experience and bridges the generation gap. Lastly, there is need to come up with a clear road map and action plan on what the people power movement stands for and how this struggle is going to be sustained to mobilize the masses and popularize the movement till the 2021 elections. Without these clear guidelines, by 2021 when the next elections in Uganda are held, people power movement will have disappeared in thin air.

## **The Prospect**

As already observed, the government in Uganda has been less open to the subject on political transition and usually dismisses such questions once put to him publicly.

[xx] According to government officials, Ugandans are always free to elect their leaders during the free and fair elections that the Government organizes. However, even within the NRM party, there is no deliberate effort to groom the young people for future positions or talk about the future of NRM once the current president is out of office. This inability to groom young leaders within the party and in Ugandan politics as well is a big challenge. The young people do not necessarily need to be groomed, the country needs to have an enabling environment where young people can openly and freely compete for political office or show political ambition without political reprisal.

Though Ugandan politics has been conceived and sustained by violence, Ugandans have always found time to sit and have open conversations about the future of their country. The current call for a national dialogue is led by the IRCU and TEFU who have produced a national dialogue process framework paper. This needs to be adopted by the executive, and if possible should lead to the creation of an independent body to oversee it with religious, political, CSO and local leaders represented. The national dialogue needs also to be widely circulated among all sections of Ugandans so that they can be aware of the positive move to political transition which will dispel all current violent actions aimed at political transition. This should however be seen as a first step. Practically, there is a need to make deliberate efforts to integrate the interests of key individuals and groups in the power structure for instance in the form immunity against persecution as an enticement to join the dialogue process. There is also a need to make Uganda Electoral commission (UEC) more independent and inclusive through electoral reforms.

## **Conclusion**

In order for political transition to be effective, there should be very powerful forces pushing for it. These forces can be the individual leader in power, the political party in power, a revolutionary movement, the army or even the international community. In the case of Uganda, the forces pushing for a political transition suffer from several weaknesses. The continued stability and strength of the government in Uganda suggests that a political transition will require the involvement of actors such as the international community or the Ugandan army. Until this latter scenario comes to pass, the question of political transition in Uganda will only remain a mirage for many Ugandans.

Tumwebaze Noah is an independent research consultant based in Uganda and currently working with Wasafiri Consulting to tackle complex situations with innovative solutions. His professional and research interest include human

trafficking, Violent extremism, peace and conflict studies and governance. He can be reached at [tumenoa@yahoo.com](mailto:tumenoa@yahoo.com) / [noah@wasafiriconsulting.com](mailto:noah@wasafiriconsulting.com).

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/tumwebaze-noah-84995559/>

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[vi] *The Kampala Dispatch*. "Understanding 'Age Limit' numbers in parliament of Uganda" September 26, 2017, <http://dispatch.ug/2017/09/26/understanding-age-limit-numbers-parliament-uganda/> (accessed 12 September 2018).

[vii] Kiggundu, Edris. "Analysis: 65 articles of the constitution amended since 1995." *Nile Post*, November 21, 2017, <https://nilepost.co.ug/2017/11/21/analysis-65-articles-of-constitution-amended-since-1996/> (accessed 15 September 2018).

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[xi] Ibid

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[xv] *The Daily Monitor*. Thursday 13 February 2014. Editorial, “Political Transition: Uganda comes first.” February 13, 2014.

[xvi] Izama, Angelo & Michael Wilkerson. “Uganda: Museveni’s triumph and weakness.” *Journal of Democracy* 22 (2011): 64-78.

[xvii] Ibid, Inter-Religious Council of Uganda.

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## Ambling toward Democracy: Lessons for Ethiopia from Successful Transitions

By Ezekiel Gebissa



Ethiopia is one of the latest newcomers to the wave of democracy that began to roll across Africa in the early 1990s. Impelled by the social protest movement that began in the Oromia region in November 2015 and lasted three years, the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has ushered in political reforms that effectively ended a quarter century of authoritarian rule. The reform measures have relaxed the prevailing political tension and removed the specter of impending state collapse. Despite a palpable rhetorical shift, there remains uncertainty whether or not the country is securely on course to make a successful transition to democracy. A sense of drift has spurred interparty frenzy and jockeying for power, sometimes resulting in armed skirmishes.

More than at any time in the past Ethiopia is at the proverbial political crossroads.<sup>[i]</sup> Democratization seems the only path that can offer a realistic chance to prevent the possibility of a failed state. The viability of the country depends on democratic transition and consolidation. The reward for a successful transition is clear, although the process is likely to be bumpy, arduous and occasionally painful. The prospect of a return to benign authoritarian rule is a distinct possibility; democratic backsliding is not out of question.

Despite a voluminous literature of “transitology”, there is no theory of transition that predicts a sure path to full-fledged democracy. In this article, based on insights from

two seminal works on democratic transitions,<sup>[iii]</sup> I highlight some structural weaknesses that present a fatal danger to the Ethiopian transition and ultimately the hope of a democratic polity. My hope is that Ethiopia's transition leaders draw on the lessons of successful transitions and adopt policies that can prevent reversals, put the transition on an irreversible course, and lay a solid foundation for a genuine and enduring democracy.

### **Elections and Transition to Democracy**

No other known mechanism exists than free, fair and competitive elections to complete transition from an authoritarian regime to democratic rule. A broad consensus holds that Ethiopia's case is no exception. Speaking to a convention of Ethiopian Muslims in Washington DC in late July 2018, Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian prime minister, affirmed the seminal importance of democratic elections: "My ultimate goal in the next two years is to ensure [that] a democratic election takes place in Ethiopia."

Elections ending authoritarian rule mark the first step toward a more open, participatory and accountable politics. But the process remains fraught with difficult challenges. The existing electoral system in Ethiopia cannot be the basis for conducting credible and legitimate elections. Political parties that have now flocked into the country, hoping to participate in shaping the future of the country are constrained by the Electoral Law (Proclamation No. 532/2007) and Political Parties Registration Law (Proclamation No. 573/2008). Promises have been made to amend these laws. But with district and precinct level elections scheduled for May 2019, no changes have yet been announced. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), the body designed to ensure the EPRDF's remaining in power, does not have sufficient public trust to administer and manage free and fair elections.

A clear lesson from other transitions is that elections — even sham elections — can facilitate eventual transition to substantive democracy. Indeed studies<sup>[iv]</sup> confirm that authoritarian regimes that show initial willingness to open up the political space are more likely to become more democratic if the opposition shows readiness to compromise. The purpose of elections is thus not just to complete a genuine democratic transition but can also help to build a democratic culture for the future.

In this scheme of things, the key aim of reform should be to establish broad acceptance of the basic rules of democratic political competition. Electoral laws must not be a gift of the ruling party to the opposition and the people. It is important that Ethiopians view electoral laws as impartial. The drafting process must be inclusive and the product one that respects the rights of all stakeholders. Overall, laws must be reformed in a way that offers opportunities to strengthen electoral-

management bodies as independent, impartial, credible and professional institutions.

### **Transition and the Role of Courts**

Even when elections are conducted successfully, ample experience shows that results might be contested. Courts play a critical role in settling disputes arising from controversial electoral verdicts. The challenge for the courts is to maintain public trust even when they render decisions that may disappoint a large segment of the public or of the political class. In the process, courts risk their credibility and legitimacy and their unique place as one of the three pillars of democratic governance.

In Ethiopia's case, the credibility of the courts has been considerably challenged. The public perception is that all institutions are defenders of an authoritarian system. To be regarded as impartial arbiters in settling electoral disputes, they must gain credibility. The appointment of new officers would be an encouraging signal of intent to undertake legal sector reform and to establish the rule of law. In this endeavor, nothing is more important and complex than the construction and consolidation of a legal system based on a democratic ethos. The law must be at the service of ensuring a stable democracy, respecting human rights, maintaining social peace and security, and advancing greater freedom for all.

In the transition from authoritarianism to a functioning democracy, the construction of durable institutions is essential. In legal-sector reform, the central concept is the rule of law. There is, however, much more to reform than restructuring the courts, police and prisons. A broader view would ensure equality under the law. Legal-sector reform during Ethiopia's transition must be undertaken in order to create the foundation for a legal system in a democratic republic. It takes time for the courts and other law enforcement agencies – and their officers – to build trust with the public. A robust legal-sector reform program is already long overdue.

### **Transition and Security Sector Reform**

A successful election and legitimate legal-sector intervention are *sin quo non*, but they cannot guarantee a successful transition. Candidates and their supporters may not accept Court rulings in electoral disputes. If electoral disputes escalate to disruption of law and order, security forces might be called on to restore order. The Ethiopian security system was always organized, trained and funded to provide security for the regime rather than for the public. In the past quarter century, the command structure of security institutions has belonged to the ruling elite. With this history and reputation, it has limited capacity to act as a national security system designed to protect the public, the constitution and the country.

Experience shows that state security institutions must be reformed, as a precondition for a successful democratic transition and for sustainable peace. The goal of reform must be a strong foundation for a people-centered security framework in which the military, paramilitary and internal security forces, including intelligence and police forces, commit to democratic civilian control, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. A well-thought-out restructuring of Ethiopia's security apparatus, with the goal of creating forces capable of providing security for the state and its people, should not be postponed..

The thirteen transition leaders Bitar and Lowenthal interviewed emphasize the importance of bringing all the security services under democratic civilian control as soon as possible. Yves Leterme, the former Belgian premier and secretary-general of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) has underscored the necessity “to act firmly to achieve real democratic [and] real civilian control over … the military, security and intelligence forces, while simultaneously showing their restraint from political activities and partisan involvement.”<sup>[iv]</sup> Such control cannot be achieved by reshuffling commanders; it requires system-wide change.

### **Transition and Economic Policy Alternatives**

Even in an ideal situation, in which elections are conducted successfully, court rulings in electoral disputes are accepted, and security forces act within the framework of the rule of law, the democratic gains achieved could be endangered by economic shocks that precipitate widespread disaffection. Over the past three decades, many democratic transitions were derailed by such economic crises. Political leaders and stakeholders must manage economic problems and provide solutions that do not derail the transition process.

The demand for democratic change in Ethiopia was set in motion when the authoritarian bargain known as the developmental state—which promised Ethiopians prosperity in exchange for leaving politics to the elite—ruptured when state rent promoted private gains rather than encouraging long-term value creation. The result was unequal distribution of wealth, uneven access to wealth-making opportunities, mismanagement of public resources and, in some cases, adherence to models of growth unsuited to Ethiopia cultural and political realities.

Success of the transition to democracy therefore depends on management of the economy. The “authoritarian bargain” must be replaced by a “democratic bargain” that envisions broader distribution of the benefits of aggregated growth. In constructing a new bargain, transition leaders need to give priority to economic grievances – such as rising unemployment and inflation – that have provoked mass protests. The focus of the “democratic bargain” should be on equity, fairness, and inclusiveness for the most vulnerable in society.

Beyond repairing aspects of the “authoritarian bargain,” transition leaders have done little to promote inclusive dialogue about development and reformulation of policies. The Ethiopian prime minister has made conflicting statements, pronouncing continued adherence to developmental-state theories while making decisions indicating a shift toward a liberal economic policy. Because there has been no discernable departure from the command economy philosophy that has guided economic policy formulation so far, there has been negligible private investment in Ethiopia. As long as there is no policy change, the economy cannot attract private capital to stimulate the economy.

Economic reforms must be instituted at two levels. The first involves long-term strategies for encouraging private and public investment in all sectors of the economy. The second and immediate task is to focus on job creation for Ethiopia’s youth, who for the past three years were engaged in mass mobilization. Reforms have given them liberty and raised their hopes, which could be dashed if their personal economic conditions do not improve.

There is no doubt that the political situation should change to improve the lack of security that scares investors. Because Ethiopia’s debt to GDP ratio is reaching unsustainable levels, deficit financing, even if possible, is not advisable under normal conditions. But the consequence of doing nothing is even worse. If the economy sputters, the democratic transition would be derailed. What the economy needs now is emergency intervention in the form a stimulus package that focuses on small-scale projects all over the country financed through grants, loans, or direct budget subsidies from countries supporting Ethiopia’s democratization. Failure of the transition to democracy would mean state collapse in Ethiopia, which would have catastrophic consequences for the Horn of Africa.

### **Old Challenges as New**

There is a broad national consensus that the goal of the current transition is to create a functional federal, democratic, state in which people of diverse ethnic and religious affiliations enjoy justice, freedom, equality and dignity. In this respect, the transition’s definitive mission is to end not just the authoritarian regime’s excesses but also the hegemonic nature and totalizing penchants of the Ethiopian state. The transition thus has as its greatest challenge resolving the festering questions of the last half century, which revolutions in 1974 and 1991 were unable to address successfully.

The regime change of 1991 in particular failed, not because of wrong diagnosis of the political pathologies that have beset the country since the inception of the modern state. It failed because of the refusal of the group that took power to implement the prescriptions of the 1991 political bargain: the constitution and the federal administrative arrangement. In light of the alternative, implosion and disintegration, the importance of the transition cannot be overstated.

Ezekiel Gebissa has a Ph.D. in History, from Michigan State University. He is the author of several books, peer-reviewed articles, reports and book chapters on Ethiopia's cash crop agriculture, religious experiences and indigenous knowledge systems. He is recognized as a leading public intellectual and commentator on Ethiopian politics. His political commentaries regularly appear in national and international magazines

[i] There were many occasions in Ethiopian history that authors have described as "crossroads." The regime change of 1991 was such a juncture for Ethiopia to make a clean break with its autocratic political culture and embark on democratization. In his aptly titled book, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads: Decolonization and Democratization or Disintegration?*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1999, Leenco Lata put this choice in the interrogative form, "democratization or disintegration." Today it is a stark reality. The country is at another crossroads. Failure to democratize now has no fallback option.

[ii] For this article, I relied on two works on democratic transition to identify areas of policy intervention during democratic transition. The first is Isabel Colman and Terre Lawson-Remer *Pathways to Freedom: Political and Economic Lessons from Democratic Transitions*. (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2013, which compares eight countries' experiences with democratization with a view to compiling certain lessons for newly democratizing countries. The second is Sergio Bitar and Abraham F. Lowenthal's edited volume, *Democratic Transitions: Conversations with World Leaders*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, catalogs the experiences of nine countries and thirteen political and civil society figures who led the democratic transitions in their respective countries. In the preface of *Democratic Transitions*, Yves Leterme, secretary-general of the International Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance offers ideas for countries in transition.

[iii] Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972-2006*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

[iv] Santos, Lean Alfred. "10 lessons on democratic transitions and its developmental impact," Devex, September 13, 2016, <https://www.devex.com/news/10-lessons-on-democratic-transitions-and-its-development-impact-88738>.

## Faith-based Institutions and Peace-building in Ethiopia's New Context

By Moti Daba Fufa



The centrality of notions of all-encompassing humanity and religiosity in the African context is efficiently exemplified through the following anecdote. An anthropologist proposed a game to local children<sup>[ii]</sup>. The anthropologist showed them a basket of sweets and told them that whoever reaches first to the basket would get all the sweets in the basket. After starting them off with a ‘ready steady go’, the children held each other’s hands, ran together towards the basket, divided the sweets equally, and enjoyed it. The anthropologist was amazed and asked them why they did so, and the children replied to him ‘Ubuntu’ which means ‘How can one be happy when the others are sad?’ In their language it meant “I am here because we are!”<sup>[ii]</sup> This fascinating story sheds light on a specific humanistic worldview regarding the **cosmos** that encompasses the political, economic, social, and environmental dimension strongly refracted with a spiritual underpinning. The anecdote also points to the profound importance of the spiritual aspect and religiosity in African societies. Religious institutions historically have played a role in articulating the demands of communities, assumed a key role in containing and resolving conflicts. It is visibly clear that religious actors and religious organizations have been increasingly involved in and participated in attempts to make political transitions smooth and keep make peace among the people. Hence, I believe that now more than ever, it is incumbent on us all to explore how the Ubuntu ethos could be actualized, both through citizenship and also as a member of a religious community.

### **The New Ethiopian Democratic Space offers a Unique Opportunity**

The pace of change in Ethiopia has been lightning fast since HE Dr. Abiy Ahmed Ali became the youngest prime minister in Africa.<sup>[iii]</sup> Ethiopians have now been introduced to immediate change and a new dawn bringing about a new form of Ubuntu which is **Medemer**<sup>[iv]</sup>. It is a metaphor for a journey together in spite of potential differences for the sake of love, peace, forgiveness, and prosperity. The process of change in Ethiopia has led to momentous developments such as the normalization of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the peace deal between Eritrea and Djibouti, the mass release of imprisoned opposition leaders, the invitations extended to previously political parties in exile to return to their country, and the lifting of terrorism charges and the terrorism classification of several political organizations and individuals.

The transition also has economic, infrastructure, and social aspects. These aspects are expressed in the recent inter-state agreements regarding the joint operation and development of ports in the Horn of Africa<sup>[v]</sup>, the announcement of on arrival visa services for citizens of all African countries, discussions on the privatization of lucrative state enterprises, the establishment of a new cabinet comprising 50 percent female ministers, the appointment of the first ever female President<sup>[vi]</sup> and Chief Justice in modern day Ethiopia. All these changes are rapid and suggest an exciting future in the Ethiopian political arena. These decisions and developments

are encouraging and send a significant message not only for the Horn but to the continent too.

However, the country continues to face sporadic instability in the form of ethnic conflict, mob justice, internal displacement and chaos coupled with a high rate of undocumented migrants from neighbouring Eritrea. In order to ensure a sustainable peaceful political environment and movement towards a more open political space, every citizen and institution including religious institutions must support the fragile transition through active and peaceful involvement. Therefore, it is high time to ensure the sustainability of this new political environment in Ethiopia as well as the region through the efforts of both the state on one hand and religious institutions on the other.

### **Religious Institutions in the New Political Space**

In many cultures, religion was and still is the organizing principle of life. Ethiopians are an overwhelmingly religious people and survey data suggests that almost 99 percent of the population believes that “religion is most important in the lives of Ethiopian’s.[\[vi\]](#)” Religious values play a significant role in shaping the moral values, public opinion, and building bridges between communities. They have rich resources to bridge divides and achieve a culture of forgiveness and peace. Most faith institutions address key issues such as love, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and prosperity. Religious leaders also often enjoin their followers about their contributions towards a sustainable, peaceful and reconciled country and nurturing a culture of peace.

The faith-based institutions operate from the premise that the starting point for peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation is the people, not political organizations. In the Ethiopian context, religious institutions have often engaged in peace-building at the level of the grassroots, but recently faith-based organizations have been less effective solving tensions in Ethiopia especially during the past few years . Now religious organizations have a new energy and a fresh commitment from their followers, and it seems are determined once again, to take a leading role in bringing peace to Ethiopia and also the rest of Africa. Recent events such as the reconciliation process between the two synods of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church[\[vii\]](#) as well as the reconciliation of differences between the religious leaders in the Islamic community, have placed these institutions in a stronger position to work on assuring peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia. This shows us, how the religious organizations and the stability of the new political space intertwined in the context of Ethiopia. The reconciliation was a signal of bringing of opposition for forgiveness and reconciliation and this implies a strong and solid religious organization can be easily mobilized for peace in a fragmented society. The growing space for and strengthening of faith-based communities provides the opportunity and the space for collaboration and support for the new administration in Ethiopia

and its reform agenda. Therefore, the new dawn bringing, **Medemer**, invites religious organizations to the journey together in spite of potential fractious differences for the sake of forgiveness and reconciliation among Ethiopians.

Religious organizations have been an instrument of peace and played a major role in bringing peace between different oppositions to resolve their problems. Ethiopian religious institutions have played a crucial role in the mediating and facilitating dialogues in the Horn of Africa such as in South Sudan conflict since 2015<sup>[ix]</sup> and they were also involved in efforts to bridge the divide between Ethiopia and Eritrea through the support of World Council of Churches and other international organizations at large. The complimentary strategy is to minimize the suffering of human beings and to resolve conflicts among political actors through working with local communities.

The role that religious institutions have played in resolving conflicts has also been amply shown cased during the current wave of instability. A case in point is the conflict that emerged on the border between the Gedeo and West Guji communities and which led to the displacement of more than half a million people. The religious organizations played a significant role to de-escalate the violence between the two groups through discussion and reconciliation by encouraging local leaders to restore peace and assure peaceful coexistence.<sup>[x]</sup> Religious leaders worked with local leaders through workshops, integrating conflict resolution into weekly services and programmers, advocating, inter-religious cooperation, by equipping members of the congregation. Religious organization's duty is to promote discussions and dialogues to bring peace by setting aside differences in the political realm. These activities were achieved through an advocacy which elevated the voices of the voiceless into the public space with local and international organizations.

### **A Call to Commitment for Sustainable Political Environment by the Religious Organizations**

- This is a defining moment for religious organizations and Ethiopia. Religious institutions are expected to adopt a position of neutrality and impartiality during war and conflict, but this is not equivalent to inaction when injustice and killings take place. They have to be the voice of the voiceless during these challenging times.
- Religious institutions should also utilize their unique grassroots networks to concentrate on longer-term issues of forgiveness and reconciliation.
- Religious institutions should adopt a more proactive role in the daily situations of the community and start to resolve problems ahead of government. This includes bringing to the table reasonable and comprehensive solutions to commit for a sustainable political environment in Ethiopia.

- Across the Horn, communities place immense trust in faith-based organizations, which are viewed as institutions which can work on peace and reconciliation in an impartial and neutral manner. Religious institutions should leverage this implicit trust to take on a more pro-active role in working on and achieving reconciliation on the local, national and regional levels.

Moti Daba Fufa is the head of the Urban Mission and Youth Development in the Addis Ababa Synod of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EEMCY). His research focuses on the role of religious institutions in the public sphere. He can be reached through, moti\_gm@yahoo.com.

[i]<https://www.naijapeek.com/stories/ubuntu-heart-warming-story-africa>

[ii]<https://www.naijapeek.com/stories/ubuntu-heart-warming-story-africa>

[iii] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43567007>

[iv] Medemer is coming along evenwith our differences for love, peace and forgiveness.

[v]<https://allafrica.com/stories/201807240529.html>

[vi]<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/ethiopia-first-female-president-zewde>

[vii] [http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/pf-06-13-18\\_religiouscommitment-03-07](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/pf-06-13-18_religiouscommitment-03-07)

[viii] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45031578>

[ix] <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/joint-declarations/we-stand-together-to-make-peace-now>

[x][https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/22\\_november\\_peacebuilding\\_meeting\\_in\\_dilla.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/22_november_peacebuilding_meeting_in_dilla.pdf)

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### **Life & Peace Institute**

Kungsängsgatan 17  
753 22 Uppsala, Sweden

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