

Protecting Ethiopia?

By Donald Levine

Living in the Ethiopian countryside in the late 1950s, I heard festive youths chant the following words - proudly.

"*Min ale teqel min ale? 'Agarén le-sew agarén le-sew - alsetem' ale*"; literally translated as "What did *Teqel* [horse name of Emperor Haile Selassie] say, what did he say? 'I'll not hand my country's land to foreigners,' he said."

They symbolized the deep Ethiopian aversion to letting outsiders grab land belonging to *Behere Etyopiya*. Of many expressions of this sentiment over the centuries, my favorite is that of Emperor Tewodros IV, who reportedly told his troops to make sure that when British visitors departed they should have their boots cleaned: "Far more valuable than gold is a particle of Ethiopia's earth."

With the notable exception of the Aksumite conquest of portions of present-day Yemen in the sixth century, Ethiopia has not invaded foreign countries. Rather, it has repeatedly been a victim of such incursions - from Turkey and Turk-supported Adalis; from the Sudan; and from Italy. And in spite of EPRDF's initial acquiescence in the cession of Assab to Eritrea, and then of Western borderlands to Sudan, the present regime boldly, if not tragically, repulsed the Eritrean invaders of 1998 and maintains a strong force committed to the protection of Ethiopian territory.

It is in this age-old spirit that some Ethiopians warn today of new dangers of encroachment in their country and in Africa generally. This fear may well be exacerbated by recent leases of expanses of land to Saudi Arabia, India, and Egypt, and by published reports that some 50pc of Chinese businesses reportedly operate in Ethiopia illegally. Fear of outsiders spills over into anxiety about undue dependence on them.

Ethiopians were historically proud of their self-sufficient lifestyle. In a renowned Amharic novel of the 1940s, *Enda Wetach Qiretech* by Assafā Gabra Māryām, perhaps the most poignant scene is when one protagonist laments the erosion of Ethiopian self-sufficiency by importing so many things from abroad. The relatively self-sufficient *geberé* or pastoralist remains a model that a majority of Ethiopians continue to embrace.

Most problematic of all, perhaps, stands the anxiety about foreign influence in Ethiopian domestic affairs. Emperor Haile Selassie was famous for not permitting any one country to get a monopoly of influence in any national sector, especially the defense forces, by letting Swedes influence the Air Force, Norwegians the Navy, Americans the Army, and Israel the intelligence and officer training sectors.

But of course, Ethiopia has imported culture from abroad continuously for more than 2,000 years: from Sabaeans, Hebrews, Greeks, Syrian and Egyptian Christians, and Muslims. So much cannot be denied. Even so, it never absorbed this influence slavishly. Ethiopia's variants of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam exhibit distinctive Ethiopian coloration.

As I suggested in *Tiliqwa Etyopia (Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society)*, Ethiopian tradition has typically evinced a style of "creative incorporation," that is, a process whereby elements from foreign cultures have

regularly been taken in but then reworked to fit Ethiopian culture to exemplify a distinctive homeland style. This was true even up to the Ethiopian Constitution of 1957, which incorporated substantial references to the *Fetha Nagast*. (This pattern was not so evident, I believe, with the wholesale importation of Marxist-Leninism in the 1970s and 80s.)

With these points in mind, let us consider the vexed question of the legislation on charities and civil society organizations, a.k.a. CSO laws, and, related, recent statements protesting against foreign influence.

The CSO laws have been greeted by many Ethiopians as well as by Euro-American donors with alarm, as an instance of repression against benign organizations. Although when implemented that may indeed sometimes be the case, perhaps the most detrimental feature of this legislation rides on the negative perception of what that they signify. On the other hand, consider some constructive features of the CSO legislation.

For one thing, it gives Ethiopians confidence that whatever wrongful interference they found in foreign NGOs in 2005 will not be repeated. It affords them access to funds that might legitimately be claimed from donors. To my mind, the most positive thing about this legislation is that it might send a wake-up call to relatively well-off Ethiopians: If you are interested in protecting children, women, and human rights, *engage in these programs yourself*. Like nearly all countries outside the United States, Ethiopia has many customs of mutual aid at the local level, but lacks a national tradition of organized philanthropy.

The CSO restrictions might, just might, provide some incentive in that direction. A related set of concerns has been voiced by Ethiopians inside and outside the government - the concern that outside agents are telling Ethiopians what to do.

"Who are they to tell us how we should handle our own problems?"

The plaint reminds me of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam's outburst when a *Newsweek* article once accused him of importing the Red Terror from the Russians: "We do not need to borrow the idea of a Red Terror from anyone else, we are perfectly able to create one on our own!" Similar sentiments have been voiced by patriotic Ethiopians who complain that I have no business writing about Ethiopian affairs and offering suggestions.

But the point here demands thoughtful attention. When what appears to be a rejectionist sentiment is expressed by so distinguished a writer, Tesfaye Habisso, former ambassador and speaker of the Parliament, it deserves to be taken seriously. I refer to a recent article of his, "Free Elections for Democracy or Creating Client Regimes?"

The heart of Tesfaye's article jumps out from his opening paragraph: "The experience of many developing countries since the onset of the 'third wave of democratization' . . . throughout the world has unambiguously shown that these countries have faced numerous and serious difficulties in conducting free and credible elections not only because of weak democratic institutions and processes, negative political culture and the democratic deficit, lack of independence and capacity of the election management bodies and the judiciary, etc. but largely and detrimentally because of the arrogant and destructive interference of foreign powers bent on creating pliant governments and client regimes amenable to their

national interests, without any regard for the sovereignty of these countries and their peoples as well as for the consolidation of democracy and democratic culture that they publicly and loudly 'preach' at international forums. . . . The bloody chaos and disruptions that occurred after the May 2005 national and regional elections in Ethiopia were undoubtedly . . . the outcome of such Western interference and attempt bent on ousting the current nationalist and populist developmental regime and replacing it with a client government in Ethiopia that would serve the interests of the West and its multi-national/ trans-national corporations, and not Ethiopia and the Ethiopians."

This sort of claim reminds me of statements from the government of Emperor Haile Selassie, following the abortive coup d'état of the Neway brothers in 1960, which insisted that there were no problems under the government then in power and blamed the whole rebellion on Chinese Communist influence. To his credit, Tesfaye does name a indigenous factors that contributed to the mayhem, such as "negative political culture and the democratic deficit [and] lack of independence and capacity of the election management bodies and the judiciary."

And he cannot be faulted for alluding, albeit vaguely, to incidents in which foreign actors certainly did intervene in inappropriate and harmful ways into Ethiopia's own domestic political process in 2005. What concerns me most about this claim is its disregard of the numerous positive contributions that foreign powers have made in protecting Ethiopia's independence and treasures; and its support - unintentional, I suspect - to a mindset in which Ethiopians can claim that outside concerns about human rights violations and modern electoral standards represent an illegitimate abrogation of its sovereign rights.

The historic threats to Ethiopia's sovereignty came from Turkey, Adal, Sudan, and Fascist Italy - none of them, at the time, a Western democratic power.

On the other hand, consider how Portuguese helped save Ethiopia from the Adalis; how the United States opposed the Fascist conquest and its war-time President gave support to Ethiopia's ruler; and how British troops led the campaign that ousted the Italians in 1941.

Perhaps no less weighty, consider the protection of Ethiopia's historical treasures provided by the German expedition under Enno Littmann; historic discoveries by French, Italian, and American archaeologists; the protection of priceless manuscripts in the British Museum; and the work of museological expeditions from the United States and its gift of housing the most complete library of Ethiopic manuscripts in the world.

At the moment, however, the chief issue before us concerns the conduct of free democratic elections. Knowing Tesfaye as I do, I believe that he personally is as devoted to the ideals of electoral justice as any one on earth. Yet the effect of his article may be to discredit the efforts of international players in seeking to promote a free and fair electoral process. I invite the good former Ambassador to bring forth his evidence regarding what he calls the "dirty tricks and tactics of Western state agencies and their NGOs together with their servile local media agents and NGOs in the country who unashamedly orchestrated those foul and sinister games during and after the third national elections in Ethiopia."

But let me be clear: I seek here not to best my brother Tesfaye in an argument

game but to direct the attention of Ethiopians to the fact that they have for a long time been beholden in some ways to the moral pressures of the Western world. The most dramatic instances of this concern the practice and trade of slaves, which was rampant throughout Ethiopia in the early decades of the last century. It was the pressure of members of the League of Nations that prodded Ras Tafari to sign a proclamation ending slave trading in Ethiopia in 1923. And it was cognate pressure from other countries, including the United States, that forced the Imperial Ethiopian government to pass laws outlawing slavery as a condition for joining—indeed, as the only African country to be a Founding Member of—the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945. And that took some doing. I can report interviews with a number of Ethiopians in the 1950s who even then regretted that outside powers had forced them to give up their slaves.

At present, we live in a world in which it is no longer possible for any country - not least the United States, Egypt, Arabia, Israel, Iran, and China - to hide behind walls of national sovereignty in order to defend practices that do not hold up to standards that were to be sure indeed Western in origin but have now become universal. Foremost among these are the universal codes that respect human rights, codes that have been inscribed so eloquently in Ethiopia's Constitution—and which, be it recalled, Ethiopia championed when she voted for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

In mustering support for those codes, Ethiopia should welcome, not defend against, support from whatever quarter to advance those rights, just as it welcomes food from Western quarters to help feed its starving millions. Needless to say, in both domains the assistance should be given with tact, respect, and the full support of Ethiopian authorities, and that in turn requires a process of learning about Ethiopian sensibilities that often has failed to take place.