

The Enigma of the Western Crusade against Ethiopia and the Insidious Face of Racism

Borkena July 16, 2021



By Messay Kebede

One thing that has been most incomprehensible for many Ethiopian observers, activists, and politicians is the barrage of one-sided criticisms coming from Western capitals since the eruption in November of an armed conflict between the federal government and the TPLF's controlled northern region of Tigray. Directed exclusively against the federal government, the criticisms were soon followed by the implementations of various sanctions that elevated the surprise to the level of utter consternation. The deep differences over the direction of the country under the reformist leadership of Prime Minister Abiy constitute the underlying causes of the conflict. The immediate cause of the war, however, was the surprise attack of TPLF militia forces on the national defense forces stationed in Tigray. The Ethiopian government launched an all-out counter-offensive that it baptized "law enforcement operation," which resulted in the quick and complete disbanding of TPLF forces. Unsurprisingly, severe humanitarian crises ranging from food shortages and killings of civilians to massive displacements into a neighboring country soon followed the military confrontation.

From Disbelief to Consternation

In light of the sudden and unprovoked attack on the Ethiopian national forces, the expectation of the Ethiopian government and most Ethiopians was that Western governments and opinions would see the Ethiopian counter-offensive as a legitimate move of self-defense and law enforcement. The expectation never came to fruition. Instead, the Ethiopian troops were accused of a host of violations that included the killings of innocent civilians, the rapes of women, the deliberate destruction of properties and, last but not least, the engagement in genocidal acts. To make matters worse, the involvement in the counter-offensive of Eritrean troops and Amhara militia forces, both reputed to be quite hostile to Tigrean leaders and elites, made the accusations of massive human rights violations even more credible. The end result of all this is that everything was turned upside down: the attacker was seen as the victim.

The Ethiopian surprise is all the harder to contain as Western governments did not show the same eagerness to express their condemnations during the 27 years of the TPLF's horrific rule of Ethiopia. Even when repression became so intensified that it compelled the legislative branch of the US government to break the silence, not one single punitive measure was taken. To crown it all, President Obama described the TPLF's government as a "democratically elected government" during his August 2015 visit to Ethiopia, even as all the 547 seats in the parliament were taken by its members and supporters and numerous activists and political leaders were languishing in jail where they were routinely tortured. Worse still, not one Western government expressed any outrage over the well documented recent massacre in Mai-Kadra of scores of Amhara residents by the TPLF forces in the wake of their retreat from advancing governmental troops and Amhara militia forces. The silence extended to major Western media outlets, which otherwise gave extensive coverage to alleged atrocities committed by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. After the pause of dismay, the only conclusion left for Ethiopians was to say that the TPLF remains the favorite ally of Western governments and that their open hostility toward the present government is an attempt to come to its rescue.

Western Dictates

For any impartial observer, the silence of Western governments on the far-reaching violations of human rights during the TPLF's tyrannical rule of Ethiopia is proof enough that the accusation of systematic, widespread, and gross violations of human rights by Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara armed forces is just a smoke screen for underlying geopolitical concerns. According to the Western assessment, not only is the bellicose relation between Tigray and the federal government aggravating the ethnic tensions internal to Ethiopia, but also the involvement of Eritrean troops will have a destabilizing impact on the entire Horn of Africa. In addition, the current dispute between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan over the Nile dam and the looming war with Sudan over border disputes have the potential of igniting the flame of war across the whole region.

To prevent all these calamities from happening, the Western position prescribes the restoration of peace in Tigray through a negotiated settlement with the TPLF as the first necessary step, even though the TPLF, which started an unprovoked war, is severely incapacitated as a result of its crushing military defeat. The negotiation should be extended to all other opposing parties, with the goal of reaching "a wider national reconciliation process" in Ethiopia (G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Situation in Tigray, Ethiopia, April 2, 2021).

At first look, the proposed solution seems to be a reasonable one in that negotiations and national reconciliation are usually conducive to the restoration of national peace. Unfortunately, one has to be totally or fraudulently ignorant of the situation in Ethiopia to propose such a remedy. The proposal to negotiate with a party that is widely abhorred for its atrocities and its use of ethnicity as a divide-and-rule tactic to achieve political and economic hegemony, even though it

represented a region with only 6% of the Ethiopian population, is nothing short of a dreadful slap in the face of Ethiopians. As to the inclusion of other opposing parties, their own extremist, and sometimes even secessionist, ethno-nationalist ideologies prevent them from participating in the mainstream of Ethiopian politics. So that, the proposed negotiation has no chance of succeeding, still less of reinstating peace. On the contrary, it has the potential of intensifying ethnic clashes already underway all over the country, with the result that the country will be engulfed in an uncontrollable civil war. Clearly, the Libyan tragic experience of removing a government without a viable alternative has not yet wised up Western governments.

What, then, is preventing Western governments from seeing what is but obvious for so many Ethiopians? Since the concern for humanitarian crises is not believable, there remains the geopolitical interest of the West. In the eyes of Western governments, the scenario of an expanding war to neighboring states is quite present unless the Ethiopian government agrees to settle all its disputes by means of negotiations. More importantly, these negotiations will have any chance to succeed only if they are supervised by forces that are capable of putting real pressure on all the concerned parties, like the European Union and notably the US government.

Granted the logic of the argument, the hitch is that, as already stated, the suggested negotiated solutions have zero chance of achieving the goal of peace. The solutions do not take into account that the war in Tigray as well as the various clashes in different parts of the country are caused by groups that harbor extremist ethnonationalist ideologies. It is indeed strange to assume that these groups will negotiate in good faith and will commit to be responsible members of a representative government. By contrast, the right solution, that is, the solution that arises from the existing problems, would be to strengthen the existing government so that it prevails over these violent forces and establishes a lasting internal peace. As to the external problems, the approach to intimidate Ethiopia only encourages Egypt and Sudan to become more intransigent, and so stands in the way of negotiated settlements. In short, the unbalanced intervention of Western governments does no more than seek the capitulation of Ethiopia; it does not facilitate negotiations.

Consider, for instance, the Ethiopian government's unilateral decision to declare ceasefire and withdraw its troops from Tigray. One would normally expect that Western governments and media sources would welcome such a decision. Unbelievable as it may seem, not only the expectation did not materialize, but also the decision became a springboard for another round of criticisms and threats of further sanctions. The reason for this unexpected reaction springs from the Western frustration of not being obeyed: the West wanted a negotiated settlement, not a unilateral ceasefire, as it excludes the TPLF and the ethnonationalist forces. Similarly, West governments drag their feet on recognizing Abiy as the legitimate Prime Minister of Ethiopia, even though he and his party obtained a resounding victory in the recent elections that many observers considered as relatively

democratic—compared to all previous elections in Ethiopia—under very difficult circumstances. The reason for this hesitation is the same: the US government posited negotiations between contending forces and the government as a precondition for the holding of the national elections, even if among the contending parties that boycotted the elections, some were and still are prone to the use of intimidation and violent methods. Raising the democratic bar to an unprecedented level for a third-world country, we heard Secretary Blinken say, “Elections . . . are not in and of themselves a sufficient marker of democracy or genuine political reform.” Had it been another country than Ethiopia, we would have heard him say that the elections, as difficult as they have been, are a step in the right direction.

The Emotional Mixture

The attitude of Western governments is all the more incomprehensible the more we recall that, until not long ago, Ethiopia was considered as an important and reliable ally of the West. What then is the added element that explains the sudden shift of Western policy toward Abiy and his government? To see that the change was indeed sudden, we just have to recall the phone conversation that Secretary Blinken had with Prime Minister Abiy on February 5, 2021, and in which he “reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to Ethiopia’s reform agenda and support for the upcoming national elections.”

We have already discarded the humanitarian concern. Geopolitical reasons are not enough to explain the change, either, since when an ally is in trouble, the expectation is that you come to its rescue. The explanation jumps out when one puts into play the terms of the partnership between Ethiopia and the West, namely, the status of Ethiopia as a junior partner. From the persistent refusal of Ethiopian authorities to abide by the terms set by the West as a condition for the peaceful resolution of the war in Tigray and of the conflicts with neighboring countries, the West drew the conclusion that the junior partner no longer wants to play by the rules. Instead of playing the cards dealt to it by the West, the junior partner has adopted the viewpoint of what it considers to be its legitimate rights and interests. Western unfair criticisms and sanctions are punishments for the naughty behavior of a junior partner.

The point is that the Western reactions and measures cannot be justified in terms of geopolitical considerations. The best that they can achieve is to weaken the Ethiopian state, which so far has been the only reliable and stabilizing force in the Horn. Moreover, such a weakening can only give free rein to ethnonationalist forces within Ethiopia itself, thereby turning the specter of a widespread civil war into an unavoidable outcome. The reckless nature of the Western resolutions and measures is so tangible that one must infer that they stem from an emotional state of mind rather than from rational deliberations, the very emotional state at being rebuffed by a junior partner. Where obedience is expected, defiance must entail punishment, and this is all the truer when the junior partner belongs to a poverty-stricken continent that falls short of the capacity needed to govern itself.

For those who contest the racist overtone of the Western measures, I simply ask them to remember that what defines racism is not so much the hatred of the other as the expectation of an unconditional obedience from the person ranked as inferior. Hate requires the recognition of some measure of parity, whereas as racism is more sensitive to the lack of acknowledgement of superiority. As such, racism induces sentiments like anger, irritation, and even outrage, which are reactions to the breach of required submission, that is, to the hierarchical norms governing the relations between races. My contention is that the irrational and reckless nature of the Western reactions vis-à-vis Ethiopia compels us to admit the big part played by racist indignation at seeing the defiant behavior of Ethiopian authorities. The indignation also explains the moral smugness of the West, which not only gives so easily credit to all the stories of rape, indiscriminate killings, and genocidal acts concocted by the TPLF's supporters, but also justifies intervention in the name of the obligation of "the morally superior" to tame those who still live in barbarism.

[Messay Kebede](#) is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Dayton

Disclaimer: Opinions expressed within the content are solely the author's and do not reflect the opinions and beliefs of AEPAC, its website or its affiliates.