

“The West wants a weakened Abiy”

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By **Brook Abdu** INTERVIEW

(Source – The Reporter)

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Gabriel Negatu is a seasoned policy advisor who has worked at continental and global institutions including the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the World Bank. Gabriel holds a bachelor's degree in geography and planning from California State University and a master's degree in public and international administration focusing on economics and social development from the University of Pittsburgh. He also advanced his studies at Harvard University School of Business, and the University of Manchester. With more than 25 years of senior level policy and program experience, Gabriel served as AfDB's Director General, East Africa Regional Development and Business Delivery Office until he left in 2019. Gabriel is also a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council with the Africa Center. The Atlantic Council is a US think tank in the field of international affairs that has been in operation since 1961. Currently an advisor at the World Bank, Gabriel has extensively written on economies and conflicts including the recent one in the northern part of Ethiopia. In this interview with The Reporter's Brook Abdu, Gabriel Negatu addresses the interests of the Horn of Africa in the context of the conflict in the northern Ethiopia vis-à-vis the long term economic and human costs of the war. Excerpts:

The Reporter: Let's begin with why the Horn of Africa attracts so much attention from global superpowers. When did these interests in the Horn of Africa begin to emerge and what do these interest groups look from the region?

Gabriel Negatu: So, the question is why and when. Let's start with why. The Horn of Africa region is a very critical corridor or interest to the West and the East. When you look at the region, it comes all the way from Egypt down the Suez, the Red Sea and into the Indian Ocean; it is the only waterway that connects Europe to Asia. A vast majority of the global oil trade passes through it. The region has a very narrow bottleneck at Bab-el-Mandeb, just off of the coast of Djibouti where much of the world's oil supply passes through. And whoever controls that narrow passageway really controls trade between Europe and Asia. Close to 40 percent of trade between Europe and Asia passes through that. So, it has that maritime logistics relevance.

Second, it is a region strategically located between the Middle East and to a certain extent Europe. If you stand on the Red Sea Coast on the African side, across you'll see Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and by extension all the Arab countries including Israel, Egypt and so on. It is either a divide or a bridge that connects the two regions – the Middle East and Africa. So, the Horn of Africa then becomes the bridge connecting Africa to the Middle East and on to Asia. For that strategic reason, many of the Western and Arab countries are interested in this region.

Third, again having to do with geopolitical consideration, if you control a piece of property or a piece of land in the Horn of Africa facing East towards the Red Sea, if you have a military or naval base,

then you can control the global maritime traffic. That is the area where a lot of the superpowers' naval forces go up and down. Look at Djibouti. Djibouti hosts five or six naval bases. For a small country, that is a lot. But Djibouti, because of its strategic location at the mouth of the Bab-el-Mandeb, everybody wants a piece of property there to establish a naval base. Look at Eritrea's Assab; the naval base that was built during Emperor Haile Selassie's time is today used by the UAE as a base to launch air strikes against the Houthis across the sea in Yemen. Go further north into Sudan; recently the Turks are trying to get hold of the Suakin Island. The Qataris have also been trying to get hold of that. The Russians have also been signing agreements and cancelling them repeatedly to establish a naval presence in those waters. Again, because it provides a strategic site where their submarines can come undetected underwater, get refueled, and leave. So having a presence in the Red Sea is critical for economic, geostrategic, and political reasons.

When did this start? I suppose it has always been there. But the significance has gone up and down. Going back as far as the creation of the Suez Canal, the French, and the British, built the Canal and built the waterway that connects with Europe. I think that is a turning point. The region has always been a trading post for all these spice trades between the Arabs, Indians and Africans who always went up and down the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean down the road to Tanzania, Zanzibar and even to Mozambique across to India, Oman and all these areas. The Indian spice trade and all that have gone for hundreds of years.

But in more recent times, I think it is first, the Suez Canal and then subsequently the turbulence in the Middle East. For example, recently we had fallout between the Saudis and the Qataris that meant those supporting the Qataris, particularly Turkey and so on were on different sides and each one was trying to get a foothold in the Horn of Africa because they see it as a critical waterway just across Saudi Arabia. The Arabs plus the Iranians, most recently now, are interested in the region because of their interest in Yemen. The Houthis are allegedly supported by the Iranians. The Arabs have amplified their interest in the Red Sea.

Then, if you go further into China and Russia, which are sort of the new superpowers, are interested in the region. China sees the Horn of Africa as an entry into the African continent. They see Ethiopia particularly as a gateway into the rest of the continent. Therefore, they have a great deal of interest. Russia has always been here. In the 70s they were with Somalia's Said Barre. Then they shifted sides and came to Mengistu Hailemariam during the Ethio-Somali war. They are also in Sudan. The Horn has always been an interest to Russia. They have a long history of people to people, as well as military friendship and commercial interests as well. The UK has been in the region; they colonized Egypt and part of Yemen and parts of Somalia and Sudan. So, in one form or another they always have been there during the colonial time. During Emperor Haile Selassie's time, the US had Kagnew military base in Asmara; they have Camp Lemonaire in Djibouti, which is a huge military base. Everyone has been there for sometime and their interest continues to grow.

The Reporter: You have mentioned countries from both sides of the Red Sea. However, what place does Ethiopia hold in this region?

Gabriel Negatu: Ethiopia is the anchor country in this region. Ironically enough, Ethiopia is not directly exposed to the red sea, right? But because of its size of the population, the size of its economy, the military size, etc., Ethiopia remains a dominant force in this region. Look at Djibouti. Djibouti's economy is largely a service economy and that service is to Ethiopia. Somaliland will soon

follow in Djibouti's footsteps. Ethiopia's relation with Somalia is good now because President Farmaajo and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed have created strong solidarity between the two of them. During Meles' time, Ethiopia was the security linchpin of the region. Ethiopia several times invaded Somalia and chased away Islamic Courts and always had military presence both through AMISOM and independent presence on the ground. Once the relation with Eritrea was tense because of the conflict but now we have found our peace and Ethiopia and Eritrea are moving forward together. So, Ethiopia has been the anchor in this region; if there were no Ethiopia, the whole region would fall apart economically, politically and socially. Should something happen in Ethiopia, the fallout will be felt in the entire region and I am certain it will bring down the entire region. So, Ethiopia is the glue that holds the region together – the axis on which the whole region rotates.

The Reporter: Unfortunately, the region has never been devoid of war and protracted conflicts mainly of ethnic nature. How can this be put into context in relation to the interests at play in the region?

Gabriel Negatu: You are quite right. The region had not been devoid of conflicts. But I would gesture to say, part of it is a proxy conflict; it is somebody else's conflict as there are other forces behind. If you look at the recent history, say the last 50 years, for example Ethiopia and Somalia were client states. There was the Soviets on one side and the Americans on the other side; then they switched sides. Therefore, even though we were the belligerents and the ones fighting, our wars were fueled by others. If you look at Ethio-Eritrea, I think there were hands behind that war as well. It has never been the people of Ethiopia versus the people of Eritrea. Yes, we are responsible for the wars – don't get me wrong – and it is our fault that we go to war. But there is some added fuel to this conflict by external powers – that is the context within which I would put it.

But our interest has also varied. The process of state formation has been ongoing. Remember Somalia gained its independence in the 1960s, Eritrea in the 1990s, Sudan in the 60s. So, there is that state formation process and boundary demarcation issues. Hence, you are bound to have differences, conflicts, expansionist states seeking to aggress on the others. The result of course is going to war. As far as I remember throughout my life and for sure throughout your life, that region has never been completely peaceful. There has always been a rebel movement, war, etc. Perhaps, Djibouti is the only exception as it has always remained peaceful. Other than that, we have always managed to pick fights with one another over matters that really do not deserve an all-out carnage and loss of life. But I think the influence of external interests has always exacerbated the situation. That is the context I will put it under.

The Reporter: One of the recent conflicts in this region is the northern Ethiopian war. The war that started in the Tigray region on November 4, 2020, has attracted a wide range of attention from the international community. While Ethiopia argues this is an internal matter, pressures were mounting on Ethiopia in the name of stopping the war. What do you think are the West's interests in Ethiopia?

Gabriel Negatu: It is an unfortunate situation that Ethiopia finds itself in. But Ethiopia was forced into this situation. What started as a law enforcement action, and in my understanding, it remains a law enforcement campaign, has turned into a full-fledged war that has been exacerbated by the TPLF forces. It is unfortunate to see brothers killing brothers and sisters killing sisters. Ethiopia cannot afford this; the people of Ethiopia cannot afford this and they do not want this. And I think this is a message to the TPLF leadership that Ethiopians, most particularly Tigreans, do not want this and

can't afford this. Whatever their issue is, they should try to resolve it around a table. Ethiopia is a democracy and has a constitutional order. That should be the basis for resolving matters – not resorting to conflict.

Having said that, the West has several layered interests. The first top most interest is humanitarian concern – letting in humanitarian aid to the country, into the north. They tell you this over and over. Despite the fact that the humanitarian concerns are equally in the Amhara and Afar regions, they are very reluctant to mention those. This is a noble cause as there is humanitarian concern in Tigray; there should be humanitarian aid in Tigray. There is no disputing that. In fact, the Ethiopian government provides 70 percent of humanitarian aid into Tigray. There is no one who denies humanitarian concern in Tigray but in my view, because of other motives, the humanitarian concern has become a trojan horse in which the west has other agenda. Even when they are granted full access, the Ethiopian government still provides 70 percent of the humanitarian aid, not the West. The humanitarian concern is a legitimate concern, but I worry it may be the façade of a deeper layered interest.

In my view, the West is, whether they will admit it or not, may be unhappy with Abiy's regime. Here you have a young, vibrant, energetic leader who has come to power on the back of a popular uprising against the TPLF, and who has since unleashed far reaching economic and political reforms, held free, fair and democratic election and has been overwhelmingly elected as the legitimate leader of the country. I follow elections across Africa and I would put this election against any in Africa – it was free, fair, fully contested. Yes, there are some political prisoners who are under arrest for crimes but except those, from everything we've seen, political parties were free to contest, had their free airtime, debated in public, were given access to all parts of the country with the exception of those regions that were in conflict, and elections were held. The Ethiopian people showed their maturity, civility and their good manners by standing in line for hours under inclement weather to cast their votes peacefully. It was so rewarding to see Ethiopians so well organized and orchestrated at those elections. Yes, there were some irregularities here and there. But there is a process in place where those grievances were reported to the Election Board and had been handled, again in a democratic and constitutional manner.

Now you have a leader of a country who has a popular mandate. Part of his mandate comes from the fact that he is a very strong Ethiopian nationalist who advances the Ethiopian agenda no matter what. This gives the West some concern. Their primary interest in the region as a whole is stability. And they know stability of the Horn is stability of Ethiopia. In the war area, their concern had been humanitarian, which I said is a trojan horse. But overall, in Ethiopia and the entire region, their preeminent interest is to ensure that the region remains stable. Somalia remains stable-doesn't fall under Al-Shabaab; Ethiopia remains stable, Kenya and so on. For them, Ethiopia again is the stability anchor.

While they want Ethiopia to be stable, they have concerns about a very strong, independent and nationalist leader like Abiy Ahmed to run it. They liked him when he came; as a person he is very likable, young, smart, well educated, articulate and capable of thinking for himself and for his country. Less dependent on the East or the West but looking for the best interest of Ethiopia wherever he finds it. He is equally at ease with Washington, at ease with Beijing and at ease with Moscow, Abu Dhabi or Jeddah. His agenda is Ethiopia, nothing else. This gives them concern because

now you have a leader who is not under their control. In the past 30 years, even though we have a very strong leader in the form of Meles Zenawi, he was very much their man. He did their bidding in the region; doing what they wanted him to do. And in return they looked the other way when Meles and his government repressed Ethiopians. Despite the 2005 elections and the massacre that happened in Addis, Susan Rice said it is a 100 percent democratic election; Obama comes to Addis and praises former PM Hailemariam Desalegn for having a free and fair democratic election. They know very well that did not happen. But because these people give them comfort, they were willing to support them regardless. In my view, I don't find Abiy in that mold—he is too independent, too nationalist and too Ethiopia minded. This worries them.

You see, a lot of people think the West wants to remove Abiy; I don't believe they want to remove Abiy. But they want to weaken him. When the conflict in the north happened, they didn't come out officially and condemn it. To this day the Biden Administration has said many things about the conflict but it has not said “stop the conflict because this is a war against a constitutional order and a democratically elected government.”

I recently wrote a piece for the Atlantic Council where I compared what happened in Khartoum and what happened in Addis. In Khartoum Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok was assaulted by the military, deposed and put under a house arrest. The US was first to react. It mobilized the West and said this will not stand. They wanted his reinstatement even though he is not a democratically elected, but constitutionally mandated leader. They were emphatic about it and rightfully so. The military power grab was declared unacceptable and they stood for democratic transition. Across the border, in Ethiopia, a democratically elected government is being assaulted by a rebel movement that is attempting a power grab. The best the US could do was to call on both sides to sit down and talk. This is what I call the *false equivalency* – they equated a democratically elected government through a constitutional order to a rebel group that is trying to grab power by force. To me that is a negation of the principles of democratic governance. And, the only justification I could see for this is that, the West wants a weakened Abiy.

The Reporter: You said that the West does not want to bring about regime change in Ethiopia despite the government and other observers' claims that they are looking for a regime change in Addis. What assessments led you to say that the West does not want a regime change in Ethiopia?

Gabriel Negatu: It is not because they love Abiy or any romantic notion; it's simply because they know the cost of a regime change in Ethiopia would be total disaster. Any effort to change regime against the will of the Ethiopian people – forty plus million people have spoken – any effort to go against their will would turn the region into an inferno. The West knows this scenario very well. The cost of a regime change is unattainable in political, financial, economic and human terms.

However, as I said, they also do not want a very strong, Ethiopianist Abiy. They rather have him stay but under their condition. I think one of the top priorities of Abiy's regime is, as it wraps up the war and restores peace and stability into most parts of the country, it needs to launch a major diplomatic offensive into the neighbors in the region and to the west to explain his government's position and search for a reproachment with the West and the East. Abiy is right – he is Ethiopia's elected leader and his job everyday is to lookout for the interest of Ethiopia whether it is in the East, West, North or the South. And that is precisely what he is doing and that is what is giving them the concern. But I think it is now for him to try and mend these misunderstandings. Generally, there is a very positive

and goodwill in the US towards Ethiopia. Except for a very few friends of the TPLF, Americans generally are positive towards Ethiopia and it is now for Abiy and the diaspora and everyone to work together to mend that relationship.

Regime change is unattainable and the price is so high that they wouldn't even contemplate it. You cannot find one person in Ethiopia today who could replace the PM and become acceptable to a hundred million people. The people have elected their leader and he will remain that leader.

The Reporter: One of the pressures coming from the West is in the economic realm including sanctions on Ethiopia. The US has also announced plans to suspend Ethiopia's AGOA privileges, which is a source of employment for up to one million Ethiopians. As is evident, war consumes much of the economy and this becomes challenging when it comes to countries such as Ethiopia. How do you see this war impacting the economy and how is the West's pressure impacting Ethiopia in general?

Gabriel Negatu: Well, the impact of the war, this war or any war, on the economy is ravaging. Fortunately, our economy has been quite resilient and managed to sustain the impact. But the impact continues to be devastating, no doubt. Everyday, the cost of the operation is in the hundreds of millions; this is money that could go into building schools and clinics and other development projects. The cost on our foreign currency reserve has been significant, largely owing to the reduction in export. Our foreign earning has gone down; our reserves accordingly go down; our currency stability is under pressure. Overall, our economy is under a tremendous pressure.

However, I salute the men and women at the Ministry of Finance who continue to manage the economy quite prudently and continue to remain afloat. The team at the Ministry of Finance has done a wonderful job but there are limits to what they can do and for how long. If you look at the statistics, we'll continue to grow at a slower pace but impacts such as inflationary pressure, rising cost of living, shortage of goods in some areas continue unabated. Luckily, some of the leading sectors such as agriculture continue to perform very well. Nature had been good this year and rains have been very robust. So, I think a bumper harvest is predicted this year even though there will be drought and some areas remain unfarmed, some of the crops remain uncollected. Overall, Agriculture is expected to perform well.

Despite the shortage of imported foreign inputs and raw materials, I understand industry also continues to perform at a reasonable rate. Overall, the impact on the economy is tremendous particularly on foreign exchange as we are not exporting as much; we are beginning to feel that. And this is where AGOA (the African Growth Opportunity Act) comes in. AGOA is basically an export promotion program where Ethiopia has been beneficiary to the tune of a few hundred million dollars a year.

If I'm to bet, I am certain that the US will not expel Ethiopia from AGOA. It does not make economic sense; it does not make political sense and there is too much pressure from the diaspora and other US interests to tangling trade with political conditions. This is where policy makers at the State Department are getting it wrong. Sanctions do not produce the results you wish. Sanctions are not foreign policy instruments. There is a crisis in Ethiopia and it should be diplomacy that resolves the crisis, not sanctions. Sanctions should not be the first instrument to be used to resolve a crisis – they should be the final instrument. The US resorted to sanctions very early before diplomacy has been

given a chance - give diplomacy a chance and sanctions can come last. The US is wrong to couple trade with political conditionalities.

If there are human rights violations, as I suspect there may be in any war, there are political processes to resolve those but the threat of sanctions is not what you use to resolve a political crisis. I don't think sanctions will happen; the US will not sanction Ethiopia.

The economy is battered, but has remained resilient and once the war stops, the reconstruction phase will begin in earnest. There is a great deal of willingness from the diaspora to come in and help rebuild the country. If there is a silver lining to this war, it is that it has helped galvanize Ethiopia behind its leader like no other time in modern history that I can remember.

The Reporter: You said that the people at the Ministry of Finance have prudently managed the economy despite the conflict going on for more than a year now. But the Ministry has said that although they have managed to tame the economic challenges of the war, they suspect that the conflict is going to have a huge impact on the economy if it is going to be protracted. If the conflict continues, what challenges would the conflict result in the future?

Gabriel Negatu: I don't think we can sustain the conflict forever. It is not just possible. I think Ethiopia is pushed to its limits including its economy. We have managed to keep the economy moving by taking several measures both on the demand and supply sides. But if you continue to suppress demand, the economy will invariably shrink and you'll have a much smaller economy. As the foreign currency situation worsens and Ethiopia's credit in the international market plummets, the rating agencies will reduce Ethiopia's bond to junk status leading the foreign currency reserve and the value of the birr to continue to deteriorate. So, there are many ruinous impacts that could happen as a result of a sustained war. It is essential that we wrap this conflict; we give peace a chance and rebuild Ethiopia. Tigray had been battered - we need to rebuild Tigray; we need to build Amhara and Afar as well as Oromia and other regions impacted. The reconstruction will have its own impact on the economy. But the war has to stop and we have to turn our attention to rebuilding the country.

The Reporter: As you've said, the conflict cannot go on forever. It has now gone beyond one year and we know where it has reached. Where do you see this conflict heading?

Gabriel Negatu: The TPLF has to stop its aggression into Amhara and Afar. Today, the war is not in Tigray; there is no war in Tigray. And this is according to Getachew Reda himself. The war is in Amhara, Afar and parts of Oromia. This has to stop before anything else. The forces that have occupied these territories need to vacate, leave, voluntarily exit or be pushed out whatever the means is; these regions need to be free of incursion. Once you've done that, then, whatever may have given rise to the conflict, I believe, can be resolved through a roundtable discussion. If the people of Tigray have an issue, there is a process, and a constitution crafted by the TPLF itself. War is not part of that process. The TPLF must stand down - it cannot be allowed to be a destabilizing force. It is a political party and must act as such. This notion of a Tigray Defense Forces that is at par with the National Defense Forces cannot be accepted; you cannot have two large standing armies in one country. This is a provision that the constitution has to promulgate through a process of national dialogue. But for all this to happen, the war must stop, displaced people must be reinstated back to their localities and rebuilding must begin. For this to happen, peace must come and for peace to come, the TPLF forces

must vacate land that they have grabbed and occupied and move back to Tigray. From there the political process must take over.

The Reporter: We have discussed the economic impacts of the conflict and we've seen that war drains government coffers. But war also affects the working population as people are mobilized to join the armed forces. What assignments await the government after the completion of the war?

Gabriel Negatu: If we agree that war is expensive, peace may be even more expensive. Because you have a large population that has been, first displaced by the war from Afar, Amhara, Oromia and so on. These people need to be reinstated and rehabilitated; their life has to continue and they have to pick up their lives from where they left. These are the civilians.

Now, you have more than a million people that have voluntarily joined the conflict. These are people who have left their jobs, their families, their livelihoods, their business to go and fight for their motherland. These people have to be helped back into livelihood. They cannot, after dying for their country, become unemployed youth walking on the streets. This will not be acceptable. So, the government has a huge task of creating employment opportunities, creating business opportunities, creating agricultural opportunities, for these young people. There is segment of the population that has not been able to farm its land; they've lost their crops. They have to be rehabilitated. When you put all these together, beside the military, it is in the hundreds of billions. And as I said, in economic terms, peace will be more expensive than war because of the demand on the government. I think that is why the West needs to stand with Ethiopia and be counted as a friend at this time. This is the time to stand up and help rebuild Ethiopia – not taking sides on the war. That is an internal matter that Ethiopia can handle. But it is time to stand up in support of a democratically installed government and constitutional order by supporting Ethiopia rebuild itself. This is the time for the diaspora to stand up and be counted with Ethiopia to build their homeland. Now, more than ever, Ethiopia needs this population and I think this is our opportunity. And I am happy to say there is a grand movement in the diaspora to return in big numbers for the New Year/ Ethiopian Christmas and to find ways to support Ethiopia in every way possible.

The Reporter: I heard you talking about disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) in the past and you said it is much easier said than done. What challenges does the country have to overcome in this regard when it turns its attention to the productive sector of the economy in the long run?

Gabriel Negatu: DDR is easier said than done. First, when you take guns and say you are a civilian, you have to create a livelihood. The soldier tries to go back to his farm and finds out that someone has occupied that plot of land. So, reintegration will have its own issues. Take for example Wolkait, Tegede and the area around there. Demobilization and reintegration there is going to be a challenge as the original owners - the Amhara- have retaken their land. Now there is going to be a population of Tigrayans who've been displaced. You have to accommodate them with resources and land.

The reintegration will have its own challenges. Social reintegration will be a challenge. But above all, it will be the financial burden. You can't tell people go and resume your life because their lives have been disrupted; and it was disrupted because you called them to war. The farming season has passed, the crop has not been harvested, and the cows were destroyed. They will be looking to government support to help them get restarted.

All of this is huge and will take some time to get an actual dollar value of what this is going to cost. But I can assure you it is going to be in the billions and it is going to come at the same time. It is not that you can tell Amhara wait until the Afar are settled and the Afar's until the Oromo are settled. They need to be done at the same time. And the country has the capacity to do that.

That is my appeal to the Western diplomats in Addis; please stop engaging in the politics and focus on the reconstruction of the country. Leave the politics to Ethiopia and Ethiopians and focus on helping the country rebuild itself out of this quagmire it finds in.