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The Ethiopian Dilemma

Ethiopia's "Savior" Headed To Washington

Despite all indications to the contrary, many people look to some kind of modern day messiah, savior, to lead them out of misery and oppression. Unfortunately, messiah's don't come very frequently and when they do in Africa (a la Lumumba, Thomas Sankara), they have a long history of being assassinated or, if they survive, being compromised (a la Senghor, Sadat, Dos Santos). At best they represent, bring together in one person, the aspirations, the collective values of a people; at worst, they degenerate into demagogues whose promises soon deteriorate into the mud, controlled largely by outside forces and the thinnest of thin social strata in their own country.

Over the next few days, Ethiopia's new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed (1), will visit the United States. From the announcements I have been able to see, his first stop will be Washington DC, site of the largest Ethiopian Community in the United States. He'll meet with the community as well as with officials in the Trump Administration before returning home to Addis Ababa.

The celebrations of Ethiopia's U.S. diaspora community coincide with the Abiy Ahmed's upcoming visit to the United States. He'll also visit Minneapolis and Los Angeles to connect to other large Ethiopian communities. His appointment – he wasn't elected – as prime minister by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has ignited hope for badly needed change both in Ethiopia and among the Ethiopia diaspora, including the 500,000 strong community in the United States.

Having lived through decades of civil strife and repression, the Ethiopian diaspora, like the Tunisian and Egyptian diasporas a decade ago, are pinning a great deal of hope that Abiy can turn the country around. This is also the case of the Trump Administration, which nudged (or is it dictated?) a change in Ethiopia's political direction, and, for its own strategic reasons (to be discussed in a later blog entry) pushed an unwilling EPRDR leadership to grudgingly accept a facelift (in exchange for what – also to be discussed later).

How far-reaching will the needed changes be? It's a tall order.

But, beyond the media hype and exaggeration, a more in depth picture of what happened in Ethiopia this past year is coming into focus. On a surface level, it is simple: one prime minister resigned and was replaced by another. Although he had plans to enact more or less the same reforms as his replacement, Hailmariam Desalegn was pressured to resign after six years in power. During his time at the helm, the Ethiopian economy was characterized by dramatic economic growth, but growing inequalities and extensive repression with brutal crackdowns on the country's opposition.

The Desalegn government's instability was heightened by the growing coordination and collaboration of the country's opposition groups as well as by foreign pressure, including from the United States, whose strategic interests in the Horn of Africa are intimately tied up to its relationship with Ethiopia (more on this in a latter blog article). In response to government repression, crackdowns on opposition, militant demonstrations, uprisings, were spreading throughout the country and had started to coalesce into a more unified and coordinate movement.

It was this movement from below that forced the government's hand.

The EPRDF had to do something, "something" being to offer the population a hint of change without threatening the fundamentals of actually existing power, or all the change necessary to maintain the status quo. The result was a face lift, a new prime minister, coming from an ethnically oppressed population (the Oromos), young, apparently personally dynamic and not unwilling to mingle with the different elements of the population, certainly more open-minded than his predecessors, multi lingual in three of the countries main languages (Amharic, Tigre, Oromic as well as English), an Ethiopian Obama or Gorbachev if you will or at least a facsimile.

Abiy Appointment Hailed in Addis Ababa...and Washington

The announcement that Ethiopia would pursue such a course came in April, after a U.S. Under Secretary of State for Africa Affairs, Donald Yamamoto visit to Addis where he

met with Abiy. On the same trip, Yamamoto visited Eritrea as well. Then shortly after Yamamoto left the Horn of Africa, both countries announced reconciliation steps based on what is referred to as the Algiers Agreement of 2000, that only took 18 years to begin implementing. Algeria played a pivotal role in those negotiations. The Algerian government resembles that of Ethiopia in certain ways (a country run in the shadows by the country's military and security apparatus with the trappings of multi-party and democracy and a toothless figurehead president),

The Abiy appointment gave both the country and the Ethiopian diaspora, what it had long aspired to: dignity and hope. No doubt the new prime minister has changed the mood of the country and its supporters abroad although what it all means to the country's future and to U. S. – Ethiopian relations remains to be seen

Abiy Ahmed is a 41 year old former senior intelligence and security apparatus officer of mixed Christian and Moslem background from the Omo ethnic group, Ethiopia's largest minority group. It has greatly suffered at the hands of the Tigran controlled government led by the EPRDF. Although essentially a political insider, chosen to rule by the country's tightly controlled old guard, Abiy has been hailed as a reformer, compared in the Western media to Nelson Mandela, Gorbachev, and his coming to power as "a new dawn."

True, Abiy has undertaken a series of dramatic steps that have created great expectations among many (but not all) Ethiopians both in the Horn of Africa and in the Ethiopia diaspora. There have been a few changes at the top, gestures of good will towards the general public (discussed just below) hinting at least of a new more open tone. For example, the head of the prison system was fired and a few of the leading generals and members of the country's security apparatus were sacked as well.

Among the more dramatic new developments. In the first hundred days of his acceding to power

+ Abiy closed Addis Ababa's notorious Maekelawi prison and released tens of thousands of political prisoners, including major opposition figures, journalists and bloggers. It was known as the country's main torture chamber.

+ He promised and delivered on reviving Ethiopia's long censored press.

+ In an effort to end the 27 year state of war with Eritrea, Abiy, reached out to Eritrea to bring the state of war between it and Ethiopia to an end. He did so in close coordination with the U.S. State Dept. Abiy's call for reconciliation with Eritrea came after a late April visit to Ethiopia and Eritrea by U.S. Under Secretary of State Donald Yamamoto.

In a country that has known repression, political instability, horrific droughts and nothing short of a nightmare of governments since the 1974 overthrow of the (self-declared) Emperor Haili Selassie's government in 1974, and whose series of misfortunes date back even further to the late 1800s with the onset of the Italian colonial venture in the country, Abiy Ahmed's gestures struck a chord

Below The Surface

But looking below the surface, a different picture emerges of an entrenched old guard – long heavily subsidized and supported by Washington by the way – that is still very much in control.

The Ethiopian people might have aspired (as did those of Tunisia and Egypt a decade ago) a truly radical shift in the country's body politic. By all appearances, what they have gotten so far instead, despite all the Western (and Ethiopian) media hype, is little more than a carefully orchestrated face-lift. Behind the scenes the EPRDF, controlled by the Tigre ethnic group, still holds the reigns of power of what has been described as an “iron fisted state.”

- + Although the ruling EPRDF is technically “a coalition” of four ethnic groups, overwhelmingly that coalition is run by the Tigre minority. Making up just 6% of the population, the Tigres dominate the upper echelons of the Ethiopian military and control the country's security apparatus.

- + Fueled by a kind of rampant nepotism that pre-Arab Spring Tunisians and Egyptians would recognize, the country's economic boom has lopsidedly benefitted the ruling Tigre minority strata to the detriment of the country's other ethnic groups.

- + There is no change of course in the country's economic program, which has followed World Bank/International Monetary Fund policies to the detriment of the Ethiopian people, for decades. If anything, the new government will be even more open to foreign capital penetration than in the past.

- + There are no plans to change the country's ethnic federalist system, the structural source of continued ethnic tensions.

Washington's Fear – The Iran Syndrome – Losing A Strategic Ally

Already during the Obama years, Washington was well aware that Desalegn's hold on power was becoming increasingly fragile and that his usefulness as a strategic ally was increasingly limited. In what amounted to a pre-emptive move intended to counter a truly popular revolution that would have swept the current ethnically based Ethiopian from

power, Washington pressed the ruling, to show Desalegn the door and to replace him with a more media-friendly leader

Will the Ethiopian people get “the whole loaf” – a new, more publicly committed, more democratic government. Or will it be just “half a loaf,” or...”a tenth of a loaf?” It is the case that once a country’s population, like that of Ethiopia’s, through its popular opposition movement, begins to sense the power of its unified challenge, that the process of change can break through the boundaries imposed from above. And it could happen in Ethiopia that what the world is seeing is just the onset of a truly more deep-going radical process.

Are deeper-going reforms in the offing?

Possibly but doubtful.

The new political atmosphere has been carefully crafted both in Addis Ababa and Washington to put a lid on deep going radical change. Their idea is to use the rhetoric of revolution, social change in order to manage and limit the process of change. The gestures taken so far by the new government, the world has seen before: an old worn out autocrat – a Ben Ali, a Mubarek – repressive, greedy and nepotistic – removed from power by a popular upsurge; political prisoners released, new faces in the national leadership – but the institutional/political economic model remains unchanged. After a brief fling with press freedoms and multi-party democracy, the whole experiment bogs down in an Ennahdha (Muslim Brotherhood) run affair in Tunisia or an open military dictatorship in Egypt.

In the Ethiopian case, neither the EPRDF nor its Washington sponsors are likely to risk anything that might threaten existing power and bilateral relations. There is not the slightest hint in the current Ethiopian political fluidity to suggest an fundamental shift in power. Under the surface, and not that far, it is still the military and the security apparatus that run the show.

Thus the Ethiopian dilemma.

The changes that the Ethiopian people want – an end to the country’s long history of ethnic politics, an independent path of economic development, greater democracy, an end to the corruption, repression and nepotism, a regional and foreign policy not driven by foreign priorities – they are unlikely to get without continued mass struggle.