

Beyond Election: The illusion of democratization in Ethiopia

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(Please note that names and acronyms of parties, in this article, are used in informal way commonly used among Ethiopians)

For any careful observer of the political process in Ethiopia, it is no more worthwhile to plan, discuss or argue about how to win the upcoming election. The slim hope some may have that the election will be, at the minimum, competitive and exciting their hope should have been blown up to the thin air by now. Whether the election is fair and free or not, as many accurately predicted in the past, Woyane will win by landslide.

No other than the oppositions themselves inflicted the damage to resulting potentially disastrous electoral outcome. The pictures posted in various websites from Ethiopia oppositions town hall meetings clearly indicate that AEUP and MEDREK including even the underestimated EDP will divide the vote pretty much equally in areas where these parties are competing. In doing so, the most likely votes casted against TPLF will end up divided into three smaller pieces among the three parties. Under these circumstances, it is no brainer to conclude that Woyane has tremendous competitive advantage over the oppositions.

It is evident that Woyane has not felt the slightest pressure from the opposition by this electoral process and apparently has no worry that it will lose the election. Confident as it is, Woyane is making sure that none of the oppositions boycott the election and create no doubt in Woyane's legitimate victory. What speaks to this fact is no other Zenawi's repeated warning for the leaders of the oppositions not to entertain the idea of boycotting the election. Like it or not, except posturing empty bravado, the oppositions will heed to his warning and complete the process of the election with no major complaint. If there is any complaint or accusation, it will be against each other but not against Woyane.

All in all, the oppositions have no chance to enhance their capacity to enforce necessary changes in the government/parliament as many citizens wished. At national level, we might be surprised if the oppositions who had seats in the parliament manage to hold on the number of seats they had in the last election. It is safe to assume that they will be worse off as compared to where they have been in the last election. In any event, the election will be concluded by firming up Woyane's grip at all levels of government and in all regions.

It is time to go back to a drawing board and ask basic questions, what is next after the election? What are the people of Ethiopia struggling for? Are all opponents of Woyane share the same vision for Ethiopia? Do we have adequate information to

understand the major differences among the parties? Is our yard stick to support one party over the other based on the party philosophy or leadership characters?

Although there are close to 60 ethnic and ideology based political parties in Ethiopia, the major opposition parties are three commonly known as, MEDREK, AEUP and EDP. At present, citizens lump Oppositions as one and seem to support one or the other party by the leadership personalities rather than the guiding principles of the parties.

The existing political landscape in Ethiopia has not allowed citizens to get as much information as they need to make choices among oppositions. In electoral process, citizens should be well informed about the parties in order to make the right choices and be master of their own destiny. Although there is apparent difference, citizens are not well informed of the guiding principle and organizational difference between MEDREK (an ethnically organized coalition) on one hand and AEUP and EDP (non ethnic parties) on the other hand.

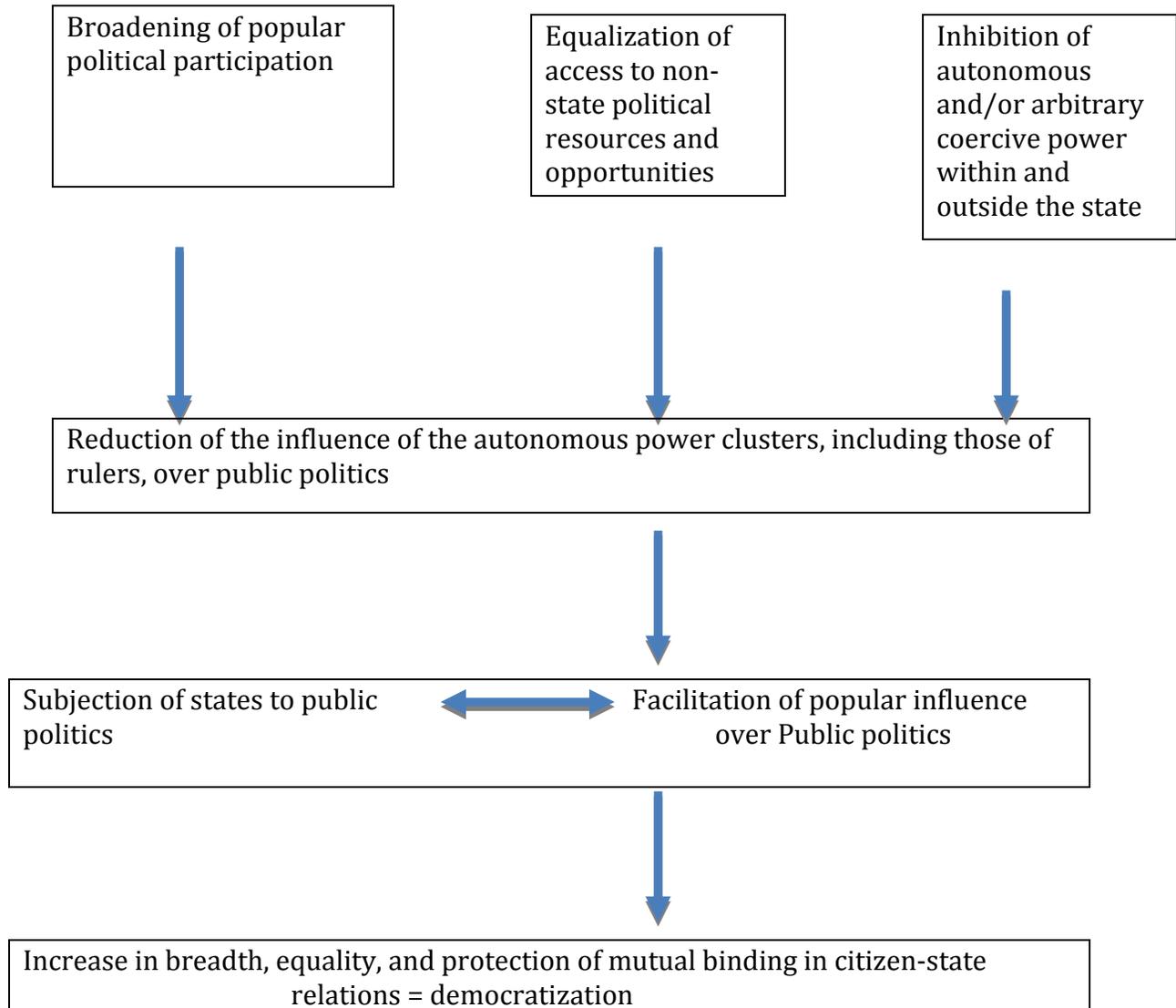
One good thing that comes out of 2005 Kinijit movement is that the feeling of Ethiopiawinet is still striving in the hearts of the population; despite consistent attack from ethnic separatist movements. Not only Woyane, many others who have been in the fringe of ethnic loyalty have come to understand that their political ambition may not be realized or garner popular support unless they embrace Ethiopiawinet.

However, it remains that the causes of our political conflict are either perceived or real inequality among citizens and ethnic groups. There is a consensus among the oppositions that an outdated political tradition of bitterness, animosity, hatred, ethnic division, exclusion and, prejudices will not respond to the hopes and aspirations of the people of Ethiopia.

Still, there is disagreement among political elites in what kind of political philosophy and organizations effectively promote democratization in Ethiopia. Some insists that political organization should originate within various ethnic groups and scale up to build a loose coalition of ethnic parties at national level. These groups are protective and are concerned that other or outside ethnic groups will infringe on the rights and resources of another ethnic groups. The opposite views are all inclusive and insist that political organization should be ethnic neutral and should be formed with no consideration of ethnic origin. They are more concerned that the ethnic political organizations will ferment more conflict among ethnic groups, promote exclusion and violate individual rights including the rights of ethnic members.

Ethiopians need an open and honest debate to understand which political process and party organizational structure could bring democracy in Ethiopia quickly without fermenting ethnic hatred, infringing in human rights but promotes equality among citizens and ethnic groups.

To promote democracy, we need to reconfigure the existing power structure and thwart any organizational structures that potentially create inequality. Social scientists produced the following simplified schematic model showing the casual connection for democratization. Reversal anywhere in these connections or absence of any one of the prerequisite inhibits democratization.



The model (in the top three boxes) indicates that broadening of popular politics, equal access to political resources, and inhibition of autonomous political power are prerequisite for democratization in multiethnic society such as Ethiopia. Under Woyane coercive rule, none of the prerequisite for democratization exist in Ethiopia. As typical tyrannical government, Woyane has no intention of broadening of popular political participation. The formation of Kinijit in 2005 has come close to

broadening of popular politics. However, the popular politics of Kinijit was brutally crushed by Woyane and the process was literally halted since then.

Similarly, inhibition of power clusters at various regional administrative levels has not been applied. Woyane is promoting autonomous power clusters through ethnic parties and other secretive arbitrary groups that enforce woyane's coercive policies at Kilil, Woreda and Kebele levels. These unruly powers at local levels seriously undermine important democratization processes. As a result, Ethiopia has not moved to the midsection of the model i.e. subjection of state to public politics and facilitation of popular influence over public politics. Therefore, undertaking election process and members of oppositions joining parliament every five years alone do not guarantee the democratization of Ethiopia as none of the prerequisites of democratization exist currently.

The model not only helps to understand the democratization process, it also assists to objectively evaluate which of the existing opposition parties are capable of promoting democratization. Under Ethiopia conditions, there are two ways to breakdown the autonomous political power of ethnic autonomous powers. The first is to create non-ethnic parties like AEUP and EDP with no autonomous coercive ethnic powers. The second is to form a loose coalition of ethnic parties with autonomous power within their Kilil/Woreda/Kebele and scale up the coalition at national level. Currently, EPRDF and MEDREK are good examples for this kind of coalitions. If it is carried out carefully, the transformation of ethnic parties to national scale has potential to break down autonomous ethnic power and facilitate national democratization process.

However, no clear and tangible road map has ever been offered how these loose ethnic coalitions like MEDREK and EPRDF will dissolve the autonomous ethnic parties within coalition. Therefore, the organizational structures of the coalitions are impediment for democratization. To date no ethnic coalitions have come forward how they can operate at national level, when their primary interest of the members are to defending ethnic rights or interest rather than calling for broad, equal, protected mutual interests. In case of EPRDF, TPLF is powerful enough to coerce and undermine the autonomous ethnic power within its coalition, allowing it to implement decisions of national interest. In the absence of powerful decision maker in the coalition e.g. MEDREK, the coalition has no capacity to enforce national political decisions. No democracy can work if decisions are not implemented.

In all fairness, voters need to be adequately informed to make the right choice. Voters' misperceptions can become formidable obstacles for democratization process. The ethnic neutral Andenet party when it joined MEDREK the leadership and many of their supporters proclaimed that Andenet will be able to influence the ethnic autonomous parties transform into national thinking. To date, they fail to offer adequate and clear explanation for the public and the members of the party how they accomplish what they have promised. Consequently, the party members divided in to two factions.

In terms of facilitating democratization, ethnic neutral party organization is by far superior than ethnic coalitions. Ethnic based coalitions have formidable obstacles to transform themselves to national level and facilitate democratization. Ethnic coalitions may not be able to forge coalitions with all existing ethnic parties and usually encounter deficiencies in covering the whole country. For instance, until Andenet, the multi ethnic party, joins MEDREK and fill the gap of Amara ethnic group, MEDREK have failed to fill the void for the big chunk of northern Ethiopia. In all honesty, one is not sure if Andenet as multiethnic party adequately represent the interest of the Amara ethnic groups. At present, Andenet party successfully masked its true intent from Amara ethnic group as it is not truly represent the interest of one ethnic group Amara as the other members of MEDREK do represent their own ethnic group interest.

The truth is, for democracy to work it needs not just an engaged citizenry, but an informed one. In the end, the burden lies with each of us as citizens. A lot of powerful groups and interests in Ethiopia and Diaspora try to manipulate public opinion and garner vote for their favorites, without being truthful. Some are clearly very good at it. Yet a democratic society depends on its independent journalists, elites and citizens. Particularly, the opposition media are morally obligated to put pressure on political representatives and demand more transparency on their short and long term plans. The elites have to direct debates to substantive issues and help citizens to understand the merits and demerits of each competing organizational structure that are crucial for our democratization effort.