

**The Role of the Diaspora in the Quest for Democratization in Ethiopia**  
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**Paper presented at the SOCEPP Canada Conference, in Ottawa, Canada**  
**January 15, 2011**

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This paper will discuss the quest of the Ethiopian Diaspora in the democratization of Ethiopia and systematically analyze the notion and experiment of democracy by comparing Ethiopia with the experience of other nations. The Ethiopian Diaspora, especially those whom I have discussed under ‘Diaspora and Home Patriotic Opposition’ in one of my recent articles<sup>1</sup>, has been relentlessly and fervidly seeking democracy in the Ethiopian setting for the last two decades. And in one form or another, it made contributions by either challenging the ruling EPRDF party or by supporting the democratic opposition in Ethiopia and also by making input in the form of ideas, policy formulations, and strategizing for the democratic process, or by hosting discussion forums and venues for the opposition outside Ethiopia.

However, neither the Ethiopian Diaspora nor the home front opposition was successful in its endeavor for the establishment of democracy in Ethiopia, while the EPRDF managed to manipulate and maintain the grips of power to this day. What seems to be the problem? In order to answer this simple question, the Ethiopian Diaspora must openly and candidly discuss the root of the problem, including problems surrounding democratic culture in its own circles.

In order to further understand the problem of democratization, thus, the Ethiopian Diaspora must be able to evolve a modicum of democratic culture within itself and then strategize how to get rid off the undemocratic political system or regime in Ethiopia. If the Diaspora’s attempt to unseat the regime in Addis Ababa without democratizing itself and then, hypothetically speaking, assumes power along with the Home front democratic forces, it will only become another non-democratic regime and preside over quasi-dictatorial political system. This would then be the epitome of a Diaspora in a permanent quest for democracy and perhaps permanent curse for Ethiopia in its efforts to make a democratic transition.

What is to be done then? The first thing the Ethiopian Diaspora should do is reaching a consensus on some definitional issues with respect to democracy. What is democracy and could it be realized in Ethiopia given the prevailing deficient political culture and the domestic and global parameters that may preclude or promote the development of democracy in Ethiopia?

For convenience and for a thorough examination of the nature and characteristics of democracy it is important to underscore that the democratic process entails “the building of political institutions, common interests, and new forms of legitimation.” Moreover, “consolidating a democracy requires building political parties and alliances capable of establishing credible national agendas and control of the military, making the security forces accountable to electoral representatives, and crafting a constitutional arrangement (voting rules, distributions of powers, checks on arbitrary action), including old and new

elites. Democratization emerges from a political process of clash and compromise and consensus building.”<sup>2</sup>

Domestic political institutions, however, are not simply forged without prior world outlook, ideology, or political philosophy that could play a major role in paving the way toward democratic consolidation. The American democratic experiment, for instance, was preceded by the Bill of Rights in the respective states; the Age of Enlightenment in Europe; the Federalist Papers; and Jeffersonian conceptual democracy. “...The fundamental democratic principles were already enshrined in the Bill of Rights of some states. For instance, the 1641 ‘body of liberties’ of Massachusetts incorporated, among other things, the following democratic rights: 1) ‘every person within this Jurisdiction, whether Inhabitant or forreiner shall enjoy the same justice and law...’ 2) ‘Everyman whether Inhabitant or forreiner, free or not free shall have liberte to come to any publique court, councel, or towne meeting...’ 3) No man shall be twice sentenced by Civill Justice for one and the same crime, offence, or Trespasse...’ 4) All Jurors Shall be Chosen Continuall by the Freemen of the Towne where they dwell...’ 5) Any Shire or Towne shall have liberte to Chose their Deputies whom and where they please for the General Court...’ 6) The Freemen of Every Township shall have power to make such by laws and constitutions as may concern the welfare of their towne, provided they are not criminall, but only of prudentiall nature...”<sup>3</sup> This ‘Body of Liberties’ was written 102 years before Thomas Jefferson was born.

Guiding principles are necessary preconditions but they are not sufficient for the foundation and establishment of a democracy. Some degree of consensus among the political actors (political parties and civic organization leaders) is required for its consolidation. “Democracy has always been a matter of political crafting to accommodate a broad consensus.”<sup>4</sup>

In order for democracy to consolidate and flourish, a culture of tolerance or toleration is a vital and necessary ingredient. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, “toleration requires people to co-exist peacefully with others who have fundamentally different beliefs or values. Arguments for tolerance include the fallibility of our beliefs, the impossibility of coercing genuine religious beliefs, respect for autonomy, the danger of civil strife, and the value of diversity.”

If Ethiopians with diverse backgrounds and ideas cannot sit down on a round table and initiate dialogue, discuss exhaustively till they agree, there is no hope for Ethiopia to make a democratic transition. On the other hand, if Ethiopians in Ethiopia and the Diaspora are serious about democracy, they must first ‘agree to disagree’. “Our best bet, therefore, is to cultivate a culture of tolerance via our own schools and higher institutions of learning, governmental (inter-governmental, non-governmental) institutions, the media and other public forums. The United Nations was at the forefront in fostering ideas of tolerance and combating intolerance. The Preamble of the UN Charter states, ‘we the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from scourge of war...to reaffirm in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, ...and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one

another as good neighbors.’ Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (Article 18), “of opinion and expression” (Article 19) and the education “should promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups” (Article 26).<sup>5</sup>

As an educator, I thought I must shoulder responsibility and make an input in the making of democracy and hence wrote several articles pertaining to democracy in Ethiopia. One of these articles, for instance, was entitled *Designing Continuum to Enrich Ethiopian Educational Discourse and Debate Culture* that I wrote in 2004. As the title of the article implies, in an effort to furnish analytical framework, I then discussed, in part, the following:

“Ancient Greeks were...famous for their rhetoric (persuasion) or argument, and indeed one of the books of Aristotle is entitled *Rhetoric*. Following Aristotle and the Greek tradition, some important concepts like *ethos* (the character of the person engaged in debate), *pathos* (the effect of rhetoric on the target audience), and *logos* (the logic and substance or content of the debate/argument) were developed. Therefore, argument (the subject-matter) in any form must entail the trio of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* with the sole purpose of understanding rather than attacking the opponent. A similar rhetoric had been developed at the University of Sankore in Songhay where the schools offered diction, prosody, and elocution; the first two for choice of words and versification and the last one for public speech and debate. In either the Greek or African tradition, the people engaged in debate strategize to convince each other by amplifying their differences and yet they respectively develop reasons and substantiated concluding remarks for the mere purpose of persuading one another. This is what we call dialogue, and it is healthy. Civil debates or dialogue is a carefully crafted discussion forum with the sole purpose of exchanging ideas and if necessary nullifying the line of arguments of the opponent, but without resorting to denigrating other perspectives.”<sup>6</sup>

The main role of the Ethiopian Diaspora in the quest for democracy in Ethiopia, thus, should be to arm itself with prerequisites for a democratic culture and then begin to hope install democracy in Ethiopia. In all the Diaspora Ethiopian communities, radio networks, pal talks, websites, and blogs, and even in live but informal gatherings, Ethiopians can initiate Ethiopian dialogue sessions by considering the following models<sup>7</sup>

1. **The principle of Negotiation:** The analogy that we can use here is, a group of people ready to eat a pie. They will negotiate on how to divide up the pie equally among themselves. Underscore the word *equally*. They have already established a form of mutual respect and confidence (a consensus), and above all a collective consciousness toward forming a permanent society based on equality. But the negotiation will not be limited to sharing the pie only; the group will, in fact, creatively come up with the idea of baking the pie. They have now formed a higher unity and a democratic culture!

2. **The Cooperation Game:** This is a game that usually involves two people or two sides as in *Gabeta* (Ethiopia) or *Fanorona* (Madagascar); it is a game to challenge the opponent but not to destroy him. The opponent is a friend who employs different tactics. It is not a foe with a hidden agenda to destroy his playmate. The ultimate objective of the Cooperation Game is to benefit equally, to win concurrently even after some exchange of propaganda or satire (not insult).
3. **Four Relationship Patterns (after Butler and Hope)**
  - a) There are plenty for all: everyone in a relationship has something to gain.
  - b) I win, you lose: this is not only intrinsically unfair; it is also not to your long-term advantage. Either the people who lose when you win will draw away from you, or the ones who remain close are the ones who complement you by showing a third pattern.
  - c) You win, I lose: This attitude builds up resentment and anger, and is therefore satisfactory to neither party: 'If you act like a doormat, don't be surprised if people walk on you.'
  - d) Lose, lose: this is a totally destructive pattern, and not likely to result in lasting relationships.

The message is pretty much clear. If we can't accommodate each other as in 'a', we can easily encounter the 'd' pattern. Our best bet would be to respect everyone's ideas, look for a common ground, broaden the basis of discussion and advocate that we are indeed (at least potentially) capacious.

### **Five Strategies Toward Realizing a Democratic Culture**

1. **Clarify:** Be sure to clarify what the other person means and what you mean. Do not make a hasty judgment, conclusion, and interpretation. Ask for clarification first.
2. **Build on what the other person says:** Instead of reaching to what you do not like about it and instantly saying "no", look for what you can accept and start with a "yes". This takes you out of conflict and straight into discussion.
3. **Cut out the blame:** Think of there being different point of view than one wrong one and one right one. Don't limit yourself to saying there is only one east; you must realize that there is north-northeast and south-southeast. Possibilities are infinite! Instead of thinking in terms of "fault", think of shared responsibility. Avoid accusations, insults or derogatory name-calling like "you are so arrogant", "you are a pig head", "you always come with negative ideas", "every sensible person would figure out that". You may opt for 'no compromise' but by doing so

you have lost your “shared responsibility” and possibly absolved the other person from his/her fault.

4. Do not escalate the fight: Whatever disagreements there are, try to resolve them peacefully; if you escalate, you may end up in deadlock or stalemate and possibly sink into the ‘lose-lose’ quagmire.
5. Avoid scapegoating: If you fail to negotiate, you should have the courage to admit that you have shortcomings. You are human after all, and therefore don’t ever project your faults and failures unto others.

Once Ethiopians implement the above models as part of their political culture, it is going to be a lot easier to masterfully handle real political engagements such as elections, negotiations at various levels of government, or even resolving social and political conflicts. The quest for democracy can become meaningful, however, when the political climate permits or encourages Ethiopians to participate freely at all levels. Robert Dahl’s paradigm is a good example of what an accommodating democratic system offers:

Meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government through regular, free, and fair elections that exclude the use of force.

A highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, such as no major (adult) social group is prevented from exercising the rights of citizenship.

A level of civil and political liberties – freedom of thought and expression, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and demonstration, freedom to form and join organization, freedom from terror and unjustified imprisonment – secured through political equality under a rule of law, sufficient to ensure that citizens (acting individually and through various associations) can develop and advocate their views and interests and contest policies and offices vigorously and autonomously.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the Dahl’s paradigm does not easily fit the Ethiopian reality and it was not easy for the contesting parties to contend, to advance and promote their ideas, and to enjoy free and fair electoral process. Unlike Western democracies and developing and middle-income nations like India and Botswana, a suffocating political atmosphere diluted the Ethiopian electoral process. The quest for democratization in Ethiopia, thus, continues unabated. If Ethiopia is going to democratize, at least it must fulfill the following elements that are featured in most democracies:

*Political parties* to contest elections, mobilize public support for or opposition to the government’s policies, and handle the succession of power

*An elected legislature* to serve the agent and advocate of the representatives' constituents, to symbolize consultation with the governed, and to act as a conduit for communication of approval and dissent from official policy

*Electoral procedures* to express mass approval or disapproval of government policy, to set limits on the course of government policy, and to renew leaders' terms of office or dismiss them

*Nonparty associations and groups* (interest groups) to supplement the formal system of representation in the legislature, to communicate their members' views to government officials, and to act as a means of consultation between the governed and the governors

*Additional linkages between the government and its citizens* to provide supplementary means of communication through guarantees of freedom of the press, the right to petition the government for the redress of grievances, and protection against official reprisals for dissent against government actions.<sup>9</sup>

On top of what Dahl and Bibby discuss in regards to the essentials in a given democracy, it is also important to consider three cultural attributes that, by and large, enhance the cornerstone of democracy. The three cultures that can be discussed in the context of contemporary Ethiopian politics are:

1. **Parochial culture:** Ethiopians exhibit neither knowledge nor interest in politics. These include the multitude of citizens in the periphery and remote corners of Ethiopia, and the de-politicized as well as apathetic elements in major urban areas.
2. **Subject culture:** Ethiopians are dimly aware of politics and political symbols but they understand their life is touched by government policies. These include the millions of Ethiopians with basic and moderate educational background. This category also includes, Ethiopians who perceive the government as an authority (not necessarily legitimate), but is not sure of its role or don't understand the subtle nuances of politics.
3. **Participant culture:** Ethiopians demonstrate "a keenly developed notion of their own political efficacy and competence as political actors." These are the highly educated, professionals, political cadres in respective political parties, and the millions who are politically conscious.<sup>10</sup>

So far we have discussed what Western and some developing countries' models, theories, and policies look like and their relevance to our quest for democratization in Ethiopia. How about us? Have we had a democratic culture in the history of Ethiopia? The answer is yes. Let me cite some examples.

During classical antiquity, especially during the Aksumite period, kings and queens did not exercise absolute power as certain historians generally assumed it; their authority was counterchecked by counsel of elders who followed the rules embodied in the *Quame Hig* (fixed legislation or constitution). Citizens who were engaged in a court of law were also assisted by *Báale Hig* (jurists, lawyers, or legal assistants). Because this kind of system prevailed in ancient Ethiopia, monarchs and lesser aristocrats governed with justice and the rule of law, which incidentally is one of the prominent features of a democracy and served as part and parcel in the Ethiopian governance. A good example of this kind of system is Emperor Ezana's administrative justice as depicted in one of his victory texts:

**I have established this throne here at Shado by the might of the Lord of Heaven, who has helped me and given me sovereignty. May the Lord of Heaven make strong my kingdom. And as he has this day conquered for me my enemy, may he conquer for me wheresoever I go. And as he has this day conquered for me, and overthrown for me my enemy, [I will rule] the people with righteousness and justice and will not oppress them. And may they preserve this throne which I have (established) for the Lord of Heaven who has made king and the earth which carries it.<sup>11</sup>**

Medieval Ethiopia was also governed with justice and its rulers had fostered some culture of tolerance and dialogue. Suffice is to mention just two examples: Atse Galawdewos' (1540-1559) dialogue and debate with the European Christian missionaries and Qostantinos' Q & A session with the Armenian delegation at the court of King Yohannes I (1667-1682) in Gondar.

“The bishop of the Franks landed with some priests, deacons and a small number of *ferenje*. He arrived at the camp of King Galawdewos in the first month of the winter of the Abyssinians...The object of this voyage of the bishop was to criticize the true faith which was brought to Ethiopia from Alexandria and openly to proclaim the false belief which issued from Rome...At this time King Galawdewos had two major cares. One of them was the controversy with the *ferenje* scholars on the subject of their lack of faith; he defeated them in argument and confounded their falsehoods. On this occasion he composed a large number of dissertations in which he laid stress on sacred texts chosen from the writings of Apostles, the Prophets and the learned men of the church...<sup>12</sup>

Qostantinos' interrogation of the Armenian bishop goes as follows:

Qostantinos said to him: ‘In what do you believe?’ The bishop said: ‘I believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, in three persons and one sole divinity.’ Qostantinos said: ‘Which of these three persons returned in human flesh?’ The bishop said: ‘It was the Son who returned in human flesh of Our Lady the holy Virgin Mary.’ Qostantinos said to him: ‘Has Christ one nature or two?’ The bishop said: ‘Christ has only one nature as has been affirmed by Athanasius, Cyril, Dioscorus and their adherents in Armenia, Syria, Egypt, and Ethiopia.’ Qostantinos said: ‘Who do you worship?’ The bishop said: ‘I worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and I venerate Our Lady Mary, mother

of God, and the holy Cross.’ Qostantinos said to him: ‘If the festival of the Christmas and the festival of the Epiphany fall on a Wednesday or a Friday do you observe the fast or do you eat?’ The bishop said: ‘I do not fast.’ The examination and interrogation being completed, Arseyanos (*another learned man at court*) said: ‘Since his faith and the precepts he follows agree with ours, we must receive this hallowed bone with hymns and songs of praise.’ This good advice greatly pleased the dignitaries and doctors. *Yohannes, who was greatly interested in religious matters, accepted this advice, and the Armenian was welcomed by the Ethiopians as one of their brethren.*<sup>13</sup>

On top of the dialogue and tolerance culture, the elders or *Shimagle* also played a pivotal role in the democratic settlement of disputes across the board in Ethiopia. The Gada of the Oromo, though a politico-military system, was essentially democratic in its operations. The king of Kaffa was advised by a democratic council who counterchecked his authority. “The Kaffa king known as *Kaffiño Tato* was “sacred” and powerful like the Abyssinian kings. Unlike the latter, however, though the throne was hereditary, political power in Kaffa was very much controlled by a six-member council or the *Mikrichos* who were empowered to elect or reject the king’s nominee for succession.”<sup>14</sup>

We, the present generation of Ethiopians, have lost the democratic cultures that we have had in the past. Some of us don’t even know that we have had such rich traditions. While it is important to rediscover our past, it is even more crucial to figure out our shortcomings and the many challenges of democracy in Ethiopia as shown below.

- The inability of the Ethiopian Diaspora to unite and forge democratic organizations that could serve as informal schools for democratic praxis.
- The lack of tolerance to different ideas, agendas, and political programs
- The ethnic divide and ethnic politics in Ethiopia that has surfaced during the rule of the EPRDF, but has now been emulated and exaggerated by Diaspora Ethiopians.
- The difficulty of defeating a regime that claims that it is democratic although in practice it is undemocratic. Unlike the Derg with an all out war agenda against the people, the EPRDF adopted a manipulative political system and employed democratic slogans as protective resemblance.
- The current organizational weakness of the opposition, which is partly caused by inherent incompetence of ideology, vision, and leadership, and partly engendered by unwilling and unyielding political system that would not consider political inclusiveness and accommodation.
- The global intervention in Ethiopian affairs that ironically contributed to the delay of the establishment of democracy in Ethiopia. The principle of democracy of the global regimes is compromised by the real politic of permanent interest that they want to promote in Third World countries as part of their foreign policy.

The democratic transformation of Ethiopia is not going to be easy, but it is not impossible to realize it. It may take time, but the democratization of Ethiopia is feasible and possible especially if all of us are engaged in planting the seeds of democratic ideals, very much like a gardener does, in Ethiopia; and once the flowers of democracy begin to blossom,

we can't afford to slack off, and if we do the buds of democracy will be taken over by aggressive weeds.

## Notes

1. Ghelawdewos Araia, *National Reconciliation and National Development in Ethiopia*, [www.africanidea.org/national\\_Reconcillation.html](http://www.africanidea.org/national_Reconcillation.html), October 22, 2010
2. Edward Friedman, *The Politics of Democratization: Generalizing East Asian Experiences*, Westview Press, 1994, p. 5
3. Ghelawdewos Araia, *What Africa Can Learn from American Democracy and Election 2006*, [www.africanidea.org/what\\_africa.html](http://www.africanidea.org/what_africa.html), November 18, 2006
4. Edward Friedman, *Ibid*, p. 32
5. Ghelawdewos Araia, *Education for Tolerance: Sustainable Dialogue for Human Dignity*, [www.africanidea.org/tolerance.html](http://www.africanidea.org/tolerance.html)
6. Ghelawdewos Araia, *Designing Continuum to Enrich Ethiopian Educational Discourse and Debate Culture*, [www.africanidea.org/designing.html](http://www.africanidea.org/designing.html)
7. The models were discussed in my article entitled 'Strategies For A Democratic Culture' that was published in 2000 by the now defunct East African Forum.
8. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, 1971
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13. Richard Pankhurst, *Ibid*, pp. 104-105
14. Ghelawdewos Araia, *ETHIOPIA: The Political Economy of Transition*, University Press of America, 1995, p. 21