

# Nonviolent Struggle: Ethiopian Exceptionalism?

By Jawar Mohammed\*

## Part I

The long oppressed citizens of Tunisia and Egypt have freed themselves. Libyans are almost there. Bahraini, Yemeni, Algerians, and Moroccans are in the middle of a fierce struggle. Our neighbors, Djiboutians have also risen up. In Ethiopia, debate is raging over whether the current wave of people's uprising should, could or would reach Meles Zenawi? While the successes in the Arab world have a visibly energizing effect, skepticism is still dominating the discourse in much of sub-Saharan Africa.

Fortunately, in the last month, most of the misconceptions about nonviolent resistance have been debunked. Thanks to the tantalizing nonviolent discipline demonstrated by the Egyptian protesters, the cultural determinism school of thought, which long declared Arab and African societies as incompatible with 'civilized' politics have been practically refuted. The growing successes of civilian movements against the brutal regimes in Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain have disproved the belief that nonviolent resistance works only against soft-authoritarians who value human life.

Skeptics are using "*Ethiopian Exceptionalism*" to argue that nonviolent strategies would not work in Ethiopia. Three of the most repeated arguments are: *ethnic fragmentation, composition of the military and low Internet penetration*. These arguments have strong factual bases and do not warrant outright dismissal. However, Ethiopia having a different condition from Egypt or Tunisia does not necessarily prevent waging a successful nonviolent resistance. It just requires a strategy specifically tailored for the exceptional realities in Ethiopia.

## The Internet

Social media gave a tremendous boost to organizers in Egypt and Tunisia. But its role is exaggerated. Now, some are saying nonviolent strategies don't work in the absence of extensive access to Internet. However, it is important to remember that, nonviolent movements have achieved their objectives in India, Chile, South Africa, Philippines etc even before the invention of the Internet. The Internet made some aspects of strategic planning easier and faster. It eliminated the security risks involved in clandestine physical meetings while making it simpler to reach and mobilize large population, quickly.

Less than 1% of Ethiopians have access to the internet through a single provider owned by the state. This will obviously make Ethiopian organizers less advantageous than their North African counterparts. Yet, it is primarily the critical mass (students and young professionals) that is involved at the strategic planning stage. In Ethiopia, sizable members of this social group have access to Internet and mobile phones. Besides, as we have observed elsewhere, once a resistance movement takes off, a regime will most likely cut all communication services, rendering the Internet useless. Therefore, organizers have to develop alternative means' of communication in order to coordinate actions and expose the regime's atrocities.

Egyptians were not fully prepared for the Internet blackout. But they overcame these challenges by reaching out to the outside world to which Google responded by creating a voice to text system. The call to tweet system allowed people to use landlines to leave messages that were posted on their twitter accounts as tweets. As such, the low Internet penetration will not save Meles; it might just make it a bit harder for the organizers. In fact, if he chooses to follow on Mubarak's footsteps and unplug both the Internet and telephone, he will be the one at the losing end as his security apparatus, party structure and public share the same telecom system. Shutting off the country's sole telecom system will disconnect most of his oppressive machinery. This was one of the factors for the quick demise of Mubarak's 1.5 million strong police. Since the least financed individual citizens have proven to be more creative than the resourceful state bureaucracy, it is likely that the movement will find a way to turn darkness into strategic advantages.

In the past, activists had difficulty attracting international attention to atrocities committed by authoritarian regimes. The ongoing wave of revolution has captured the global spotlight more than ever before. Every dictator is under a media watch and any sign of resistance will definitely gain broader coverage. A picture

or video clip taken on a cheap cell phone in rural Ethiopia can instantly wind up on social media. This fresh and irrefutable firsthand account will reach the biggest news outlets - fresh and unedited. There was practically no media in Libya in the early days of the protest. Gaddafi shut down all communications to the outside world. But this did not prevent the evidence of his brutality from reaching the watchful eyes on international community, sometimes as it was happening.

Therefore, whether Meles is butchering the people of Adigrat, Gode, Moyale or Matama, the fact will be on Aljazeera, broadcast back to his subjects and to the wider world. He cannot stop it. At the moment dictators are at a great disadvantage. This is a golden moment that needs to be seized by all oppressed people yearning for freedom.

### **Composition of Military**

The Egyptian army was showered with praises for its neutrality, and rightly so. However, too much credit is given to the “professionalism” of the army than other factors such as the role of the United States and most importantly the strategy organizers deployed to restrain the military. By emphasizing the ‘professionalism’ of the army, the planners made a tactical choice long before the confrontation. Once repeated by analysts and pundits alike, the army was systematically put under moral pressure to protect its image.

The primary duty of every military is to protect the government of the day. The degree of its loyalty could be different depending on connections with the ruler. A lot has been said about the loyalty of the Ethiopian military to the system. Much of the discourse focuses on the top commanders’ ethnic identification with Meles. It is true that Meles has assigned Tigreans to most of the key command positions. And the primary rationale for this is a cold strategic calculation rather than favoritism (see my article on [Tigrean Nationalism](#)).

Unfortunately, the opposition has been attacking the strength of this strategy. They attack the military because they seem to have resigned to the assumption that all those officers are loyal to Meles. This was exactly what the strategy was designed to achieve. This strategy must change now. Correcting factual errors and myths about the composition and internal dynamics of the military is crucial. It is common to refer to the current Ethiopian military as the TPLF army. This is factually incorrect because;

- a. Members of the military come from all corners of the country and Tigreans make up no more than 10%.
- b. Most of the soldiers below the rank of colonel were not part of the rebel movement. As such, they have little ideological or personal connection with the rulers. The majority of the TPLF’s rebel soldiers were demobilized early on to engage in business activities and some were purged while many others have retired.

The scary image about the “Agazi” division that was involved in quashing the 2005 protests needs to be reexamined. This division is described as a Tigrean only unit or sometimes as being full of mercenaries. Anecdotal evidence shows that there are several non-Tigrean Ethiopians within the rank and file of the division including the command. Most dictators have ‘presidential’ guards composed of elite soldiers who have proved their loyalty; this is certainly the case for Agazi. Most of the misinformation is provided by the regime to create a terrifying image of the military and a hostile situation between the army and the people. Critics of the system have further exaggerated, the ‘otherness’ and cruelty of this division, which further terrifies the public.

Despite its role in strengthening loyalty, ethnic composition of the military does not make it more effective against nonviolent resistance. The apartheid system in South Africa had almost an entirely white military. But it did not save the system from crumbling under the weight of people’s power. Nonviolent strategies avoid the regime’s strong pillars and target its weakest links—what Gene Sharp calls Achilles’ heels. Instead of taking the military head on, South African strategists organized a nationwide boycott of white businesses. There was nothing the security and military could do, besides harassing and arresting the key organizers. As months went by, the economic costs were unbearable even to the most racist businessmen. Thus, the cost of repression against the Black community was systematically transferred to the White community that was previously ambivalent or supported the regime. When the going got tough, the White South Africans turned up the heat on the regime, and the resulting crisis brought down the government. The hardliner P. W. Botha was replaced by a moderate F.W. De Klerk, opening the door for

'pacted' (bargained) transition.

As illustrated in this example, movements can employ several tactics either to avoid direct confrontation with the regimes' means of coercion or minimize their repressive capability. The use of low-risk actions (boycotts, work stoppage, traffic jamming, etc) at the initial stage have proved more effective.

In Ethiopia's case, a detailed assessment is needed to devise realistic strategies to cope with the regime's means of coercion and dissolve the military's loyalty to the system. From the limited information available to me, I would argue that, in the face of a carefully planned and disciplined nonviolent uprising, Meles' violent tactics will not stand a chance.

**Here is a list of things to consider:**

- a. The **local police** are the primary face of the repressive machinery particularly outside the capital. They are poorly equipped and the least skilled. They also live with people, underpaid (perhaps among the lowest paid state employees). Thus, they are as grieved as the rest of the population. But violence and abusive behaviors are well entrenched traditions of the police. They could be merciless at first encounter but will be the first to wither away as the uprising gathers momentum.
- b) Some regional governments have their own **special police**; a rapid response brigades whose primary responsibility is stepping in when a situation overwhelms the local police. Well armed and with better training than the local police, the rapid response lineup has a good record of containing midsized riots. But its strong regional loyalty is always a threat to federal authorities.
- c. The **Federal Police**, numbered in few thousands, are highly effective in its rapid response, is quick to be mobilized and well trained in crowd control. However, this force's capability, discipline and morale is in decline because they are underpaid while mostly stationed in camps within in major cities.
- d. The **National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS)** is believed to have an extended network of agents. But it relies on the Federal Police for muscle which is a source of tension between the leadership of the two agencies. NISS has been expanding and actively recruiting for its new branch of IT security.

The TPLF has built an impressive intelligence apparatus during its rebellion years but the quality of its intelligence has been in a steady decline since they took power. Currently, as part of Meles' strategy to secure their loyalty, the primary concern for many leading agents is accumulating wealth, through extortion, land sale, and partnership with the black-market sector. Credible sources indicate that, they are busy running their own personal affairs; most agents cook up Intel that is passed on to the politicians. For example, the botched Somalia operation was largely attributed to such problems. It was under the agency's nose that a top general recruited hundreds of soldiers and defected to a rebel movement. Agents often fail to identify actual rebel operatives, and instead roundup innocent citizens to present to their bosses. Strangely, during last year's reshuffle Meles has put the NISS under direct control of the Prime Minister's office indicative of the lack of confidence in the top spy chiefs. Nevertheless, this organ is quite loyal to the system and possibly the last to defect. Yet its culture of Intel fabrication and the widespread corruption works against the status quo.

- e. **The Ethiopian National Defense Force** is combat tested and is relatively in good shape but lacks experience in dealing with civilians. It has been expanding officer's colleges and also increased production of its own light weaponry. But due to poor infrastructure and outdated vehicles, its tactical mobilization is rated poor. Yet there are several units stationed in barracks within close proximity of the capital. Thanks to Meles' deeply anti-military sentiment (due to fear of a coup) the morale of the soldiers is low. They draw a small salary from the regime and the rising cost of living has made it difficult, particularly for long serving career officers. Due to perceived ethnic favoritism, mutinies and high profile defections have been taking place. The regime has responded by purging or 'grounding' almost all Oromo and Amhara senior officers and replacing them with Tigrean loyalists. This strategy might have prevented potential coups but makes the regime extremely vulnerable to nonviolent strategies. Since the majority of the soldiers feel marginalized, they identify with the grievances of the people, likely to turn on the system on the first sign of weakness on the part of the regime.

Overall, the state of Meles' forces of coercion is favorable to the resistance than the status quo. Meles knows prolonged crisis will expand the crack and weaken his position. Therefore, he is likely to try intense and deadly repression during the early stage. Below are few strategic recommendations for the resistance organizers to reduce the efficiency of security forces

- Self-restraining and organized action, nonviolent discipline are vital for co-optation
- Increase direct or indirect contact with the military, police and security
- Maximize social contact between the military personnel and population in order to keep them informed and engaged
- Communication should be strategic
  - Providing reassurance about their personal and institutional future
  - Warning about personal accountability for their action or inaction
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  - Appealing to their humanity ( future of the children, etc)
- Physical barriers could also be used to reduce mobility of security forces

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## **Part II**

### **Social Fragmentation and Civil Resistance**

One of the key reasons why dictators remain in power is the fragmentation of the society across ethnic, religious, ideological, and professional lines. Whenever their power is threatened, dictators resort to using the societal fault lines to foment division and weaken dissent. Therefore, waging vertical resistance against oppressive systems require strategically addressing the horizontal tensions within the population.

- a. The likelihood of success for nonviolent resistance increases with broad societal participation by diverse and all segments of the population.
- b. In the presence of intra-group fear, suspicions and competition, movements are vulnerable to the divide and destroy tactics of the regime.

The regime's divisive methods need to be countered with unifying strategies and tactics. For such a strategy to work, having accurate information on the causes of the fault lines and concerns of each segment of the society as well as studying past tactics employed by the regime to instigate conflict is critical. This should be followed up with strategic planning to counter the regime's divisive methods with tactics that not only undercut the measures but also make it backfire against the regime.

On the day the Egyptian resistance organizers announced their plan of January 25<sup>th</sup> march, a Coptic Church was bombed. In a dramatic contrast, on the second day of the uprising, the world watched Egyptian Christians protecting Muslims during Jum'a prayer. We also saw members of the Muslim Brotherhood forming human chains against possible attack on a church. In a popular slogan, repeated by the protesters, Egyptians chanted *Regardless Of Which God You Pray To, We Are All Egyptians*. A picture of an Imam and a Priest holding Koran and the Cross together sent a powerful message of unity. Such a change in a week's time might sound as if a miracle had struck Egypt. But the truth is all of these actions were results of prior planning.

From the outset, the organizers acknowledged the fact that Egypt has a history of communal conflict and violence. The legacy of extremist and violent religious movements still lingers. Therefore, resolving the insecurity of the Christian minority was important not only to bring that constituency onboard and withstand Mubarak's divisive tactics but also address the fear of the West about a possibility of an Islamic Egyptian state. They were successful beyond expectations. It is important to note that most of the ground

work was done months, if not years, before put to test at Tahrir Square.

### **Overcoming Meles's Divide and Rule Tactics**

Ethiopia's history and contemporary politics has led to the development of tensions among various ethnic groups and acute ideological polarization among the political elite. Over the years, competing nationalism with contradictory assessment of the past as well as diverging visions of the future has emerged. The current regime practices open discrimination and publicly promotes communal hostility. This might make civil resistance difficult but not impossible. It is possible to overcome these conditional challenges by expanding knowledge about nonviolent tactics and through careful strategic planning.

Meles has effectively utilized the ethnic card in the past. Early in his rule, he survived the Oromo resistance by scaring the day light out of the Amhara. He preached the Oromo rebels would not only exact revenge against the old ruling class but also split the country to form an independent Oromia state. Meles survived the wave of urban resistance in 2005 by scaring the previously marginalized communities about the return to the past—the Amhara oppressive rule. Furthermore, he was able to maintain the loyalty of his support base, the Tigreans, by convincing them about the possible retribution they would face, if they abandon him.

The efficiency of these strategies has significantly decreased in the past five years because;

- 1) The prisoner's dilemma between the Amhara and Oromo constituency is reaching its final stage as each side is realizing that neither benefits from the status quo. The multiple efforts at forming alliances and the significant improvements in dialogue—both in public and behind the scenes—are evidence to this. Hardliners are no longer the leading voices of each political community and the shift in rhetoric has opened the door for calmer consultations.
- 2) The Tigrean constituency is no longer an uncontested domain of the ruling party. This can be attributed to two reasons.
  - a) Tigreans have begun to realize the only beneficiaries of current policies are Meles and a small circle of his cronies at a great cost to their people.
  - b) The emergence of 'their own' credible alternatives among the opposition is chipping away at the secure base that served Meles well. The defiance showed by the people of Tigray in support of the opposition during the recent election is an irrefutable evidence of the shifting ground.

This does not mean that all sources of divisions have disappeared. There is still a fear about post Meles era. The unrelenting rhetoric of Amhara groups to replace the current federal system is a serious concern for previously marginalized groups. Similarly, the refusal of ethno-nationalist movements to renounce demands for independence is worrisome to the Amhara. Both of these concerns are legitimate. However, a regime change via nonviolent resistance is unlikely to lead to realization of those fears.

During the Egyptian uprising, many feared the Muslim Brotherhood will take over after Mubarak and establish an Islamic caliphate. Similarly, in Pinochet's Chile and Marcos' Philippines, moderates and business elites feared a communist takeover. White South Africans worried about economic expropriation and physical revenge by black nationalists. Now we know none of these fears were realized. This is one of the main differences between change through armed struggle and via nonviolent resistance. In armed struggle, almost always a single dominant force emerges. Moreover, as conflict is waged between two armies, the defeated military of the state is often dismantled and replaced by the rebel soldiers. This allows the winning party to have the ability to monopolize power and impose its partisan will.

Victory in civil resistance is an outcome of collaborative work among various political and social organizations and largely that of unaffiliated individuals. Thus, the likelihood of a single group determining the outcome is negligent. Whereas the dictator and top cronies are removed, most of the state institutions, including the military remain intact. As a result, no single group will have the capability to impose partisan objectives unilaterally. In a sense, regime change through nonviolent resistance open doors for reform rather than ushering in a full revolution as in the case of armed insurgency.

Therefore, the post Meles era should not be scary because;

- a) The immediate power vacuum will not be filled by a single group rather by a transitional government likely dominated by moderates including those from the old guard.
- b) Constitutional writing will not be a unilateral work of a single party but a product of an inclusive, long, and tiresome bargaining. My bet is that the current constitution will be adopted with slight amendments. Even in case of a gridlock, the issue will be settled through an electoral process.
- c) Because the army and state institutions will remain intact, secessionists will not be able to break away any part of the country and have to wait for the due process.
- d) If secessionists or hardcore 'unitarists' are unwilling to compromise on their agenda, they will have to do it through free, fair, and competitive election and referendums. If they can garner the necessary public support, then the people have spoken, no one can stop it.
- e) All of the groups calling for self-determination have indicated in different occasions that they would settle for a genuine federal structure built on a firmly democratic, representative, and equitable foundation.

### **Nonviolent Conflict and Fear of Civil War**

When we speak of nonviolent resistance, we are talking about waging a conflict against often a repressive government to destabilize it, obstruct its normal routine, and create nervousness and uncertainty within the pillars of power to drain the systems endurance and bring it down. But unless carefully managed and guided, such confrontations create a precarious situation and could make the country and the people vulnerable to prolonged chaos.

Dictators are most dangerous at the end of their reign. They will do whatever it takes without any concern for consequences. They would use saboteurs to instigate conflict among the population and even within the military and security apparatus—and such actions will have serious long-term consequences particularly in fragile multinational states like Ethiopia. But these dangers could be avoided through strategic planning.

- Organizers should anticipate every possible action the regime will take and prepare responsive tactics. Every repressive or divisive action by the regime should be met with action that strengthens the movement towards unity while delegitimizing the system.
- Nonviolent discipline is the key to the movement's ability to manage conflicts. The less physical violence on the part of the resisters, the more control they have over the course of the conflict and ability to maintain momentum. This can be achieved by training as many organizers as possible to build the necessary skills. Such preparation helps to identify and pacify the impact of agent provocateurs that aim to turn the situation unto uncontrolled chaos.
- Aim for quick victory but prepare for a long struggle. A prolonged conflict could lead to a stalemate and power vacuum where neither side controls large part of the country making it vulnerable to opportunistic spoilers. With well thought out strategic planning, it is possible to bring down a dictator within a brief period of time. Tactics can be sequenced to reinforce each other and multiply their impact on raising pressure on the status quo to quickly dismantle the pillars of support. But unforeseen circumstances, mistakes in implementation of strategies and external factors could derail the efficiency of the movement. In such cases, it is crucial not to lose momentum for prolonged periods which gives the regime breathing space while weakening the movement's cohesion by inducing skepticism.
- Diversionary tactics should be employed to cover strategic vulnerability. In the case of a stalemate, new combat front should be opened. Halfway through the Egyptian revolution, Mubarak stopped attacking protesters and tactically waited for the movement to run out of momentum. On the last days of the second week, the Egyptian regime looked unmovable. The

number of protesters began dwindling with only a few thousands hardcore leaders left at the square. Some opposition members began advocating for negotiation while America walked back from pressuring Mubarak, fearing the survival of his regime. The organizers responded by mobilizing a nationwide boycott. They opened new battle fronts, with fresh combatants—this time workers reinforcing the youth. This counter offensive strategy escalated the conflict, destabilizing the remaining institutions and completely crippling the state.

- If momentum continues to decline, suspending the campaign by emphasizing concession gained should be considered. There will be another round. Learn from mistakes, improvise strategies, and prepare better for the final push.
- Another way of avoiding a civil war is to make sure that no segment of the population (ethnic, religion or region) remains as the last strong hold for the dictator. Cornered in Tripoli, Gaddafi is trying to frame the conflict as a civil war between Western and Eastern Libya. I could anticipate Meles fleeing to Mekele and fortifying himself there to use Tigray as his shield. Such a move can be prevented by organizing resistance in every part of the country thereby creating an unwelcome environment everywhere. Statement of denunciation and rejection by high profile members of the specific community could also help in discouraging the dictator.

Every dictator wants to limit his subjects' imagination to a choice between living under tyranny and facing Armageddon. However, time and again, unified, disciplined and strategically planned nonviolent movements have disproved such prediction. Once people break the chain of fear and tear down the wall of tyranny, they can use the resulting civic environment to find creative solutions to their multifaceted problems. Under the watch of the free press and demand of practical results by the population, politicians who now rely on populist rhetoric will be forced to be realistic and moderate their position in order to broaden their appeal and garner electoral victory. Extremist ideologies will be put to test in competitive election or can be resisted peacefully. Public sympathy for such ideologies during repression usually does not translate into electoral support afterwards.

### **Conclusion: Word of Caution**

**There is no model revolution:** The quick success of the latest revolutions have given rise to simplistic perceptions of nonviolent resistance. Commentators are debating whether the Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan or East European model should be adopted in Ethiopia. This is a misguided debate because no country can serve as a model for another. Due to differences in social structure, nature and strength of the regime, every movement must develop realistic strategies based on careful and detailed assessment of the realities on the ground. Strategies and tactics that worked in one country may fail in another. We should look into both successful and failed movements not with hope of replicating what they have done, but to learn from their experiences and devise our own strategies to suit our unique realities.

**“It's so easy even a caveman can do it” attitude:** This is yet another simplistic interpretation that underestimates the level of preparation that is needed for a nonviolent uprising to succeed. Deceived by seemingly spontaneous swelling of crowds, the importance of leadership and organization are sometimes written off as unnecessary. A nonviolent movement needs leadership, but it does not require a **figurehead**. Leaders of nonviolent movement are usually invisible because such resistance is not organized in the traditional hierarchical manners. There is also a need to detach the movement from personalities and their politics.

It is also important to clear up the confusion between two social phenomena: protest and movement. Both are group action by means of expressing views aimed at influencing public opinion to bring change policy. The difference is that protest is a specific reaction to a *particular event or situation*. A movement however is a sustained series of contentious and collective public campaigns that employs varieties of tactics and methods. In a movement there is a common objective, and not only do the actors know what need to be changed but they also have strategies to achieve it.

On the other hand, a protest could be one of the tactics used by a movement just like boycotts, sit-ins, and strikes. For example, take a rally in the aftermath a stolen election as a tactic for a movement. In case of a protest, participants would disperse after brief standoff. In a movement, protests could be preceded and followed by actions targeting the system—a sign for a larger objective than just airing grievances. Prior strategic planning can be evidenced from the unity, sequential tactics, and discipline shown by demonstrators. We would see a sustained build up of momentum, and the demonstration survives and even gets stronger in the face of a violent response from the opponent.

It takes building a movement to bring down a dictator and replace it with a democratic system. It is true certain riots could bring down a regime. But only an organized movement guided by well planned strategy can sustain the uprising, maintain focus and unity of the public to prevent a return to dictatorship either in the hands of a military junta or due to a consolidation power by new hardliners.

Therefore, while it looks quite simple, successful nonviolent revolution is usually the result of a sophisticated and innovative strategies and tactics. Expanding our knowledge of nonviolent strategies and building our tactical skill is essential to successfully crushing a determined and well financed regime with absolute control over all means' of coercion.

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