

SHOULD THE BAD CARPENTER BLAME HIMSELF OR HIS TOOLS?

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A British journalist recently described parliamentary democracy as something “invented in the days of the horse and cart and perfected during the steam age.” His explanation on one of his editorials of “The Independent” newspaper appeared to reinforce his basic argument that some improvement has to be made to the parliamentary democracy to meet the public interests at the 21st Century. “It's time governments found a new way to let the people decide,” he said. And, the “new way” proposed by him was the Internet, which he described as “the only way to bridge the gap between disaffected citizens and politicians.”

As an advocate of e-democracy, the British journalist might be correct when he say democracy cannot truly be functioning without the employment of the Internet in conducting and monitoring an electoral process by the public. And, an increasing number of advocates of e-democracy share his view that the Internet is the sole means to ensure electorates that their votes are not rigged. Because, so the advocates say, the ballot cards are counted in the most transparent way in which the electorates are directly involved in the process using the technology. In view of this, one may not underestimate the value of the new advocacy.

However, for people like us on the other side of the planet, such an advocacy might be inconceivable. Or one can safely say that it is untimely. Because, we are not in a position either to make such a demand valuable or practicable no matter how we commit ourselves to democracy. That is not just because we are an emerging democracy that has to first and foremost address several serious challenges that threaten the very democratic process undergoing in the country. Importantly, we are just a developing country that cannot afford such sophisticated technology of huge investment and highly skilled expertise. Nor our peoples are capable of utilizing the technology for the electoral purpose as claimed by advocacy groups in the developed nations. And, when I say “our peoples” I am not referring to just a few elites

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or a few thousands more urbanites living mainly in the capital where the Internet is relatively accessible.

But I do not mean that we should not strive to intensify our efforts in building our democracy. We have to do that as much as we can and with all we have at our disposal. For one thing, democracy is a process that grows and matures through time. The second point worth-evaluating in this regard is that there is no such a thing as a perfect democracy that we should copy as it is. A system that works well in one country may lead to a very different outcome in another. That is simply because the objective reality differs from country to country.

In spite of all that Ethiopians have been in a bizarre situation where a very few elites all the time make impracticable and untimely demands, most often whenever elections approach.

It is unrealistic to think that we can reach at once the level where the leading democratic countries of the world have reached. We cannot simply do that no matter how we wish or strive to do so. The objective reality in our country requires us to develop pertinent process if what we really want is sustainable democratic transformation in this country. Without taking this reality into account, one cannot be realistic, no matter how far and loud one sends her or his shouts in favor of democracy.

For example, Ethiopia is a country where over 86 nations, nationalities and peoples live harmoniously. One cannot exclude this issue from the political context of Ethiopia , if one's goal is really to build democratic culture in a sustainable manner. If one tries to underestimate this basic reality, either that person is not a politician at all or has a hidden agenda of one's own.

One also needs to consider as how many hundreds of years democratic nations at the forefront took them to reach their present level. As the famous saying goes; Rome was not built in an overnight.

I personally believe that there will come a time when we reach on a similar stage of democratic countries in a lesser time than it took them. But, such ambition can be realized only when every one of us and above all every political party operating in the country are really committed to

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work hard both individually and jointly towards the same goal of protecting and improving the existing democratic system with all the capacity at hand.

As part of their several unconstructive activities, opposition parties are currently demanding for the revision of some functional laws as a precondition for their participation to the coming elections. As was the case in the past, there is no doubt that their present demands are all impracticable. I am not sure whether their latest demands did in fact exclude the employment of the Internet to ensure the validity of electoral process as claimed by e-democracy advocacy groups. I remember that one opposition party was making more or less similar demands with regard to the kind of ballot cards we should have. In short, what they usually demand are nonsense, impracticable and untimely. They raise issues only to deliberately stir the emotions of innocent peoples and to serve their own propaganda machines. As has been proven in the past, the goal of the self-styled parties is to control the state power if possible and to disrupt the prevailing political system by all means if not possible. All in all, what is in the mind of the opposition group in general is only power. The more some of them have been obsessed with power; the more they have become principal threat to the democratic system. Their detest to the political process has been intensifying more and more as they proved their weakness to win elections and secure state power, which they dream day and night.

Look, what the chairman of the All Ethiopians Unity Organization did recently in a meeting the party held with its supporters in Addis Ababa . He told his followers that his party will never abide by the current law of the country on flag usage. His speech marked a return to the spotlight of not only his hard-line political stance but also his covert plan of instigating violence. We know that this man was a senior official of the brutal military regime that was toppled by the EPRDF, a party now in power. No body can argue that the man and his party have the right to act the way they like as far as the flag usage is concerned. Or one cannot say that he can fly high the illegal flag even if it is meant for the purpose of electoral campaigns. If law and order has to be maintained in this country, he and a few of his followers have to be accountable to the existing laws whenever and wherever they breach them.

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The motive of the chairman of AEUO is very clear. If he is defiant to the rule of law, either he will be subjected to legal actions or execute his destructive ambitions, if he finds only the incumbent government to be lenient. In fact, one cannot also forget that the same person told media and diplomats that his party may boycott the up-coming elections unless the government meets its demands to revise some of the existing laws.

One can also add, what the other opposition party, Unity for Democracy and Justice said to its followers in Adama, on August 16, 2009 and in the subsequent press statement it issued on the next day. The UDJ's leadership told its supporters and the general public that the political space in Ethiopia has completely been shut down.. Look the statement; it did not say that it has been narrowing down as of Election 2005, as it used to say until August 16, 2009. The reason UDJ cited for its adamant shift in position was the unfortunate disruption of its planned meeting in Adama town of the Oromia State that day. The meeting was aborted because of the ill-preparation of the leadership that led to internal dispute which erupted soon the meeting was kick-off. That was because a group of its supporters demanded that the meeting should be inaugurated first in line with the usual local traditional sermons and second the speech to be delivered by the party's senior leader be presented in (or apparently translated to) the most dominant local language of the Oromo people in the area. Prior to that, the leadership was actually astounded to find out low turnout of supporters (less than 100 in attendance). That is why the leadership took the opportunity to announce that agents of the ruling party were to blame for the disruption of its meeting. That was not all. The party, apparently through its dominant leader further disclosed that the situation has compelled it to reconsider its involvement in the political process of the country. That is virtually a shift in strategy. So, will the party focus on non-peaceful means? Look, this is what a bad carpenter usually does. He blames his tools for his own inefficiency to manufacture good furniture. The leadership of UDJ had to get well prepared before commencing the meeting. Or it should have made apologies to its supporters no matter few are they in number. The basic thing is that the meeting was cancelled as a result of the inherent weakness of the party or more specifically of its leadership. What UDJ did instead was blame the existing political system.

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We know that democracy cannot create political parties. It rather encourages political parties to flourish and function well. It is rather the duty of every political party to consolidate the democratic process in any country. It is really foolish to expect the ruling party alone do the home works that have to be done by every political party.

In general, nothing new changes have come from the majority of our opposition parties at this crucial moment when we are preparing to conduct our 4th national elections. In fact, they should have also learnt from the experience in the aftermath of Elections 2005. But from their latest activities, their thoughts, their ideas have not changed.

But here is a stark message for them. The leadership of the oppositions should have to be 100% sure that they were no more above the law as some of them had been during the military regime. Moreover, the peoples of Ethiopia will never heed to their bloody propaganda and join them to disrupt the up-coming elections. They have to be clear also that the up-coming democratic elections are supported by the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians. Because, Ethiopians are now pretty much sure more than ever that such elections are the only means of establishing any legitimate government in Ethiopia . Despite the opposition parties' relentless efforts to spoil the up-coming elections, they will neither be able to stop the elections nor to make the elections appear illegitimate. They have to remember also the kind of experience the country has in suppressing illegal, non-peaceful activities as was witnessed in the aftermath of Elections 2005 despite unprecedented condemnations across the board. In short, it is better for the political parties to come to their minds and understand that the prevailing democratic situation is as encouraging to peaceful as it is discouraging to non-peaceful political struggle more than ever.