Mediating Political Space for Opposition Parties in the Ethiopian Political System: A Conceptual Framework

Berhanu Mengistu

Old Dominion University, Virginia, USA

This conceptual paper proposes a framework for a mediated political-space in the Ethiopian political system that is based on truth and justice. The framework draws from the traditional Ethiopian Sheglina/mediation system as well as from the current state of the mediation art and science in order to facilitate peaceful conflict resolution process between the government of Ethiopia and the alternative political parties as well as among and between the alternative parties themselves. Seven positive steps that the government of Ethiopia may consider to take to create conducive environment for peacemaking are outlined. To actualized what is being proposed in this concept paper, three teams of mediators/shemagles are to be organized; Team one's role is to work with the government for inside-out negotiation and similarly Team two's role is to work with the alternative parties. A third Team is dedicated to instilling values of professionalism and integrity in public services and ensuring the future sustainability of Ethiopia's public institutions by offering the educational values of alternative dispute resolutions and peacemaking to the general public.

Keywords: Mediation, Shemeglena, political space, peacemaking and team selection

Mediating Political-Space

Mediation or Shemeglena, the Amharic translation, is a common intervention method of peacemaking in the Ethiopian tradition. Judged by its modern equivalent of the mediation process, however, Shemeglena lacks some basic factors such as impartiality, neutrality and a modern version of ethical conduct necessary to be considered equivalent to a modern version of alternative dispute resolution. And yet, since the Shemeglena system has been part of the fabric of the society since time immemorial, the basic factors lacking can be easily remediated in workshops facilitated by a trained mediator to make the system very viable in addressing the complicated and complex political situations in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian political system is complicated both as framed by the constitution and as practiced in the governing process. Even though detailed discussion of the Ethiopian governance system is not the purpose of this paper, it is imperative to note that a clear understanding of both the complications and complexities of the political-economy of present Ethiopia by the would-be mediators/shemageles is one of the fundamental prerequisites for pursuing potentially successful mediation work for the creation of a political space by the ruling party of Ethiopia to the opposition parties.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the complexity of the democratization process in present Ethiopia, provide rationale for creating political space for the opposition parties by the ruling party and describe the structure and roles of two teams of mediators/shemageles, albeit a modern version of the Ethiopian tradition,

Berhanu Mengistu, Professor, College of Business and Public Administration, Old Dominion University.

and suggest a third team whose primary goal would be to engage the Ethiopian people, both at home and in the diasporas, in inclusive discourses of resolving differences through peaceful dialogues. The objective of Team One of the mediation group is to motivate the ruling party of Ethiopia for the creation of political space for the opposition parties, and Team Two's task is to help facilitate the fragmented opposition parties to come together to a negotiating table among them for collaboration in the creation of a viable opposition party or parties that will, in due course, form a potential coalition to govern.

The Democratization Process

At the risk of stating the obvious, for the most part, the democratization process anywhere is an experiment in governance, and this is the case even in established democracies. But by its nature, the outcome of the experiment requires acceptance by an opposition party or parties and willingness by the ruling party to improve the election process so that the outcome of the next election is less contested and the governing party receives its due legitimacy from the citizens. Such a democratization process, however, assumes that democratic institutions are in place and are "flourishing" in ways that are consistent with a national history and current political-economic conditions. The process further assumes that when the democratization process is perceived as legitimate and the outcome of an election is less contested, the process serves as an instrument of conflict prevention. And yet, studies in different countries that are experiencing significant levels of conflicts show that when the democratization process is used as "a veneer", either in responding to external pressure or to simply justify and legitimize a one-party rule, the facade of democratization becomes a cause for conflict rather than a means to prevent one. Other relevant observations that one could make from the body of seminal works in the conflict prevention literature include:

(1) Armed conflict is less likely to take place where there is good governance (not necessarily with democratic forms and types) that is accepted as legitimate, the system is accountable to citizens, and the rule of law prevails.

(2) Economic development and socio-economic development in general plays a role in conflict prevention; and yet, as many empirical studies indicate, development is only effective in preventing conflict if citizens feel and perceive that access to whatever is considered good by the society is equally available. Stated differently, developments that create "horizontal inequalities (perceived or real) add significantly to the risk of conflict" rather than preventing it.

(3) There are other specific social and economic variables that contribute to the incidence of societal conflicts, including ethnic stratification, corruption in its many forms (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015; Mengistu & Teklu, 2013), human right abuses, weak societies, polarized attitudes, and weak communications between and among political constituencies and communities.

Allow me to briefly unpack some of the socio-economic conditions that contribute to social unrest and will invariably lead to structural and escalated conflicts. Of the list of conflict-causing incidents, the one that is most frequently mentioned by opposition parties anywhere, including in Ethiopia, is human rights abuses. Other factors, however, can be equally serious problems as well and they may even have long-term implications for peace and security of a nation. For example, the genocide in Rwanda is often explained by the social phenomena of horizontal inequality and ethnic stratification. Both concepts, horizontal inequality and ethnic stratifications, refer to socially perceived inequalities and substantiated material gains that an ethnic group receives such as economic and social benefits that do not follow from any other internal sources unique to that

group such as acquiring superior skill sets and intelligence. But beyond perceived and/or substantiated material gains and losses, horizontal inequalities and ethnic stratification often imply unequal status among citizens with or without other social benefits to accrue along the way.

The concept of weak society, prevalent in ethnically divided societies, refers to societal conditions where the development of social capital is nonexistent or underdeveloped. Societies in this type of situation lack, among other elements, strong civic organizations, civic institutions, and civic engagement that would allow and encourage interest-based collaborations among other ethnic and regional groups to take place. The evidence from the conflict resolution literature further clearly shows that perceived and felt social contradictions lead to polarized attitudes, which in turn lead, among other things, to communication breakdowns among groups, ethnic or otherwise. In the absence of inclusive dialogue and effective communications, community relationships tend to be poor, and the inevitable result is a lack of cross-cutting social bonding, the foundation for the development of a national social capital. Furthermore, countries with such societal phenomena tend to develop polarized attitudes where blame, mistrust, and finger-pointing become the norm. Given the link between such cultural manifestations and human behavior and the functional link between attitude and behavior the inevitability of social conflict should not surprise anyone. What might be surprising are recent findings that corruption in its many forms contributes to conflict. In other words, corruption, which is a growing menace in Ethiopia now, when combined with other factor variables has a greater impact on conflict than what is commonly believed to be the cause of most wars, such as religious differences. As the Institutes for Economics and Peace's empirical study shows, "… there is a statistically significant relationship between peace and corruption". The study further notes that corruption within the police, judiciary and government is strongly associated with falling levels of peace. In other words, since increases in corruption in police and the judicial system weaken the very institutions that are established to prevent violence and conflict, increasing political instability is a likely outcome.

Since many of the elements described above are believed to be present in the Ethiopian political economy, the question becomes what roles must the ruling party and the oppositions play in mitigating, managing and transforming the political process in Ethiopia? Should there be willingness and the capacity to change, the Ethiopian government may consider taking the following substantive and symbolic positive actions towards the creation of political space for the opposition parties including:

(1) Freeing political prisoners such as journalists and, per the ruling party's constitution, allow the establishment of private social media including TV, internet, and radio. This undertaking alone not only goes a long way towards establishing trust and legitimacy, but will also help in combating the corrosive effect that corruption is having on the country. All studies, including, as mentioned above, our corruption survey in 2011, show that Mr. Sebehat Nega was correct when he observed that even religious institutions are not immune to the curse of corruption;

(2) Establish, in consultation with the opposition parties, a Code of Conduct that provides a boundary for political activities, which is binding on both the opposition and the ruling party;

(3) Empower the Election Board to impartially conduct elections at least at the federal level. In this context, as a confidence-building measure, the ruling party may promise that, should election observers find issues of voting irregularities that are beyond the impartial board's ability to resolve, the matter will be resolved through an agreed mediation team and should it be necessary by arbitration;

(4) The winning party of a fair and transparent election outcome agrees that the minority party will be represented in critical parliamentary committee assignments, such as public budgeting and finance, defense, security issues, and judicial appointments to important federal court benches;

(5) Reform laws that have both symbolic and substantive negative impacts on individuals, alternative party members and civil society organizations including the Anti-Terrorism Law;

(6) Reform the election law so that the outcome of an election at any level will be proportional rather than "winner takes all" which is the case now;

(7) A major election reform that the ruling party may consider is that the president of the nation is nationally elected rather than be party appointed as is the case now. The implication of this reform for national identity and unity (besides reducing the total dominance by a winning party of all the higher offices of the nation including the office of the prime minister) is very significant. It is easy to imagine what a sense of belonging and social bonding would emerge if a national candidate for the presidency from, say Afar region, were to campaign in other regions of the country where such contacts have not been visible especially in the last 25 years or so.

These and other steps the ruling party may consider taking should not be assumed as a precondition for any type of negotiation in making political space for the opposition. None of these changes are going to be the magic bullets in resolving all outstanding issues. Such steps, especially when they are initiated and implemented by the ruling party, however, are progressive moves that anticipate orderly change and transformation. But such changes are not easy to make unless the ruling party of the day senses a felt need that a political change is needed. The change literature suggests that change typically comes as result of anticipation, reaction to crisis and revolution. Clearly, the healthiest change is the one that is anticipatory change--as the leadership is driving the change process in anticipation of future events within and outside of the political environments. Such an approach to change, however, requires the availability of leadership that anticipates future events but also is in a power position to direct, influence and convince the narrow stakeholders, especially those who are "custodians of the status quo" that the change is in their respective best interests. The impetus for reactive change, on the other hand, comes from tangible developments, including "real and present" danger. Even in this case, the typical situation is that groups who are pro and anti-change immediately organize to stop the change process. Such developments in turn require the leadership to practice a leadership style that is both directive and participatory simultaneously. Most changes in large scale organizations, such as government are often, unfortunately, a result of crisis. The way to avoid them is to constructively engage in addressing the issues that are of mutual concern. In other words, even if the government of Ethiopia were to take the actions listed above and more, one should not expect that all the outstanding issues between the ruling party and the opposition will be resolved until the opposition engages in a new framing within itself and in due process with the ruling party of Ethiopia, EPDRF. In this case the old adage that it takes two hands to clap is an appropriate metaphor. As Justice Thurgood Marshall, one of the former US Supreme Court justices observed, "The legal system can force open doors and sometimes even knock down walls, but it cannot build bridges". "That job" insisted justice Marshall, "… belongs to you and me".

May I humbly suggest, and may I even insist like the good Justice, that the job of making bridges among the fragmented Ethiopian political parties and simultaneously between them and the government to engage in constructive dialogue for peace and development belongs to Ethiopian shemageles. To this end, as stated above in the statement of purpose for this concept paper, I would like to suggest that we (fellow travelers who believe

in constructive dialogue for peacemaking) organize initially two teams of mediators, shemageles, and a third team to follow as our capacity allows.

Two Teams of Mediators-Shemageles

I suspect the immediate question at this point is why two mediating teams? The answer is very simply that the nature of politics in Ethiopia, especially in the past two decades, demands it. As described above in the brief summary of the conflict literature, in the politics of hate and detestation the first casualty is trust in its many forms. At this initial point therefore it will be a challenge and if not impossible to find a team of mediators that would be acceptable to both the government and the opposition parties as one team. This was confirmed to me by the elders (shemageles) in July of 2014 while I was visiting Addis Ababa. At the time, they were trying to be peacemakers between the government and the opposition parties. As one of the elders said, the opposition sees us, the shemageles, as if we represent the government rather than as a neutral and impartial third party to help mediate the political issues between them and the government. Given such observations and the protracted nature of Ethiopian politics at the present time, it appears reasonable to me that a two team approach at the outset with properly designed functional linkages for the two teams is the appropriate strategy at the take-off point.

A Brief Description of the Role of the TWO Teams

Team one of the mediators/shemageles will work with the ruling party to help it realize that a meaningful and well-organized opposition party of Ethiopia is in its best interest. As mentioned above, one of the immediate payoffs to the ruling party in creating political space for the opposition is the legitimization of the ruling party's version of democracy and rule of law. In short, creating political space for the opposition parties by the ruling party of Ethiopia will have enduring symbolic and substantive values. The country will continue to build on the gains that have been made at many levels, including at individual, group, regional and national levels. At the same time, engaging the opposition in a national constructive dialogue will provide opportunities for the ruling party to amend, should that be necessary, the unintended and emergent outcomes of ethnic federalism. In this case, the skill sets the mediators will bring with them to work with the government decisively matters. In addition to the usual list of mediation skills and ethical code of conduct for mediators, which can be easily acquired in a short-term training for mediators, the mediation team should be assisted by staff researchers so that the crucial conversations they hold with the government are based on facts on the ground.

Team Two's role as Shemageles is to help the willing and able opposition parties to form a united front where feasible and to create collaborative working relationships where a united front is not politically feasible. This is, however, easier said than done. The fragmented and ethnically based nature of the opposition parties has to be understood by the Team in the context of our acknowledged historical legacies and the framing of the national constitution which uses ethnicity as an organizing unit rather than citizenship/Ethiopiawinet. In this context, even finding common ground, a footing to bridge the respective differences among the opposition parties, is a task that is not to be taken lightly. The best Team Two can do in this situation is to begin the inclusive dialogue for inside out negotiation (to negotiate among them so they can negotiate with the ruling party) and help the leadership of the oppositions to accept the fact that the best strategy foreword is unity of some type on the basis of super-ordinate goals such as Ethiopiawinet rather than staying anchored on the failed

strategy of umbilical-cord politics of the past decades. This course correction by the opposition parties to create a viable national opposition party, however, requires empathic understanding of the many sided nature of the problem some of the opposition parties themselves might be facing. In other words, while the case for unity vis-à-vis the ruling party can be easily made, the transition from ethnic representation to a national representation will not be a simple shift and reorientation. Gains have been made in the past two decades at many levels that are both perceived and substantive. These private, and in some cases collective gains at least in some of the regions/kellels, require careful analysis and empathic understanding by the mediators as well as by the political leaders of the opposition who would like to form a united party of national significance. Furthermore, those who are members of the national opposition parties need to appreciate and duly consider in sorting out what was useful and helpful in governing a multi-ethnic society for the past 20 plus years in the context of ethnic federalism. I like to add here for the sake of emphasis that as pointed out at the outset of this draft, it may be the case that the best approach for moving forward the democratization process in Ethiopia is accepting the present democratic experiment as a stage to build on and to work to improve on the unintended consequences of laws and public policy choices of the past two decades rather than recasting the die and in the process creating new conflict fronts. In other words, while unity is a desirable goal it may require incremental steps and those steps are best explored if facilitated by impartial, professional and committed mediation/shemagele teams. Clearly, the details of the "how" of the mediation process for both teams One and Two needs to be developed but that can only be mapped out through lived experiences of the teams themselves as they help the parties in conflict address the presenting problems as well as the underlying issues in the present Ethiopian governance system.

A Brief Description of the Third Team

While acknowledging the constraints and limitations of human and material resources, I would like to propose a Third Team whose focus would be to engage the Ethiopian people, both in the Diaspora and at home, in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) methods of education. I consider this project to be a long-term investment for the present and future generations of Ethiopians, and by extension to the region of the Horn of Africa where Ethiopia plays such a critical role in making war and peace. Here too as in Team One and Two, we will need team members who will come together to craft the vision, mission, goals and objectives of this critical project. The general approach to this pedagogy should be, just like the mediation work, to build on our rich traditional methods of peacemaking and at the same time to transform them to value institutional stability, justice, integrity and professionalism in public service. Anyone interested in reading more in this area, especially the value and essentiality of an impartial, competent and stable bureaucracy/public service as a foundation to the democratization process, is encouraged to read a research paper titled *Theoretical Underpinnings of Bureaucratic Neutrality in Ethnic Federalism* by Berhanu Mengistu and Elizabeth Vogel (2003). In the long term, what is essential for a lasting democratization of our mother country is to develop institutional capacities that will facilitate change, transition and transformation of governance at all levels, federal or regional/kellel, by peaceful means. Without such cultural foundations, I am afraid that undemocratic leaders leading undemocratic people may forever pursue the objectives of democracy, but that goal will remain elusive.

Team Selection

Teamwork, writes John Murphy, is a "principle-based" value and one of those values is to put the team first. In other words, teamwork is a cooperative work, in the words of Virginia Burden, "Cooperation is the thorough conviction that nobody can get there unless everybody gets there". There are other principles for effective team performance, including the willingness to communicate openly, to be part of the solution and not the problem, to use rational problem-solving methods, to build trust with integrity, to promote interdependent thinking without losing one's individuality and respect to diversity.

In the selection of the team, one of my major concerns, informed by my many years of experiences working in public and non-profit organizations, is the issue of diversity and representativeness of the team, particularly in reference to gender. Extending team membership to a woman or two for political correctness is a disservice to the team and to the person selected. Here are some rational reasons for selecting women to the team. First, recent seminal works in Conflict Resolution, particularly in the area of peace-making and the durability of the implementation of agreements show that women play very critical positive roles. Second, diversity and representativeness do not mean only counting women at the negotiating table, even though that is important, but the positive role they bring to the issue at hand is only achievable if they are in a position of influence both in the negotiation and implementation processes. With some exception, I am in full agreement with Lewis Thomas, as quoted in Dimijian (2010) "… that civilization would be much improved if men retired for 100 years and allowed women to run everything" (p. 300).

In light of these observations and facts, the team selection is very critical and will in the end be one of the determinants of the success and failure of the mediation outcome, as well as the teaching efforts of the Team Three. In short, in the words of Ken Blanchard, "None of us (men or women) is as smart as all of us" and putting together a team that represents Ethiopia in its rich diversity is of paramount importance.

Conclusions

In conclusion, please allow me to state the obvious. This conceptual paper is not intended to be a detailed road map of mediating political space for the alternative parties of Ethiopia, both among themselves and with the government, nor it is meant to be a critical analysis of the state of the political-economic affairs of Ethiopia. What I intended to do is to initiate a real and constructive conversation about the opportunities and challenges our country is facing. Secondly, even though this conceptual paper is not a prescription nor a "how to manual" for a mediated outcome of a political space for the alternative parties, I do hope that it will serve as the basis to begin to organize the teams of mediators as well as the third team, which I hope will be a positive change agent in helping develop a culture of resolving conflicts through dialogue. The question now is who is to start the process of organizing the teams? When I wrote the first draft of this concept paper back in October 2014, it was my understanding that there was going to be a consensus group that would provide leadership in taking responsibility to begin the team organizing process. I understand that group is no longer a working group. But as you all know, the political situation in our country is perhaps more urgent now than when the initial draft of this paper was written, requiring that we (fellow travelers who wish to play a constructive role in peacemaking) must act now to organize the teams. Tomorrow will be too late in impacting positive change. There is no pride of authorship with regards to receiving constructive suggestions in improving the concept paper as well as in receiving suggestions as to how to go forward in organizing the teams. I invite anyone of you or a group of you fellow travelers with open arms to start now to organize the three teams. I have only one

interest in this matter and that is that a peaceful path towards viable democratic governance is made an option for Ethiopia.

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