Protest in Ethiopia: Examining Process-Based Leadership as a Way Forward

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Introduction

Ethiopia has been plunged into one of the worst crises in the recent history of the country with waves of protest and violence erupting in some parts of the country since 2014. The announcement of a draft integrated developmental plan for Addis Ababa and neighbouring towns and villages of Oromia regional state, referred to as the 'master plan', sparked protest in April 2014 that engulfed many towns and cities of Oromia - the largest among the nine regional states formed along ethno-lingual basis.[1] Another wave of protest erupted again around mid-November 2015, this time with a far more political repercussion. Protest, which came to be known as the 'Oromo protest', erupted across the Oromia region and continues to reverberate to this date despite the heavy-crackdown by the government. The episode raised eyebrows among many scholars and politicians to comprehend what went wrong with the country that received wide accolades for its impressive economic growth. This commentary will unpack the discontents that precipitated the protest and suggest the way forward. The commentary argues that implementation of national developmental policy has caused discontent and disenfranchisement among the wider public; and underpinning national development policies with the ideals of process-based leadership would mitigate the discontents and offer sustainable, peaceful development.

Conceptualizing Process-Based Leadership (PBL)

More often than not, leadership is largely conceived as leader-centric whereby attention is given to the leader and his/her personality, role, behaviour, influence and guidance.[2] However, such conception of leadership is often not helpful in the analysis of complex situations. This is because the leader-centric approach fails to take into account the defining role of followers and the context-specific situation. As Albert Murphy argued, leadership does not reside in the person; rather, it is an interplay between the leader, the followers and the context.[3]

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[1] Ethiopia has been restructured along with ethnic federalism since the advent of the incumbent ruling party, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, since 1991.

[2] Pierce, John L. and Newstrom, John W., (2011), *Leaders and the Leadership Process: Readings, Self-Assessment and Applications,* 6th edn (New York: McGraw-Hill), p.3

[3] Murphy, Albert (1941), 'A Study of Leadership Process', *American Sociological Review*, 6 (5), pp. 674-687

Leader centric approaches are faulty in the analysis of complex situations which the wider society usually faces, whereas Process-Based Leadership (PBL) is considered more fitting.[4] PBL also offers a better alternative to aptly respond to situations faced by society as it would enhance state-society relations and mediate competing demands of different groups.[5]

PBL views leadership as a dynamic relationship and exchange of influence between the leaders and followers. Similarly, Northouse conceives leadership as an interactive event between the leader and the follower, not a one-way relationship.[6] PBL further accentuates mutuality – the sense of common purpose- between leaders and the led – without which it is hardly possible to address society's concerns.[7] What is more, the element of mutuality gives leadership an ethical overtone as it enables leaders to work together with followers to achieve certain common goals.[8] PBL also pays heed to the process in which results are achieved. It has been rightly noted that it is possible to pursue results by coercion or exclusionary means which however bring a short-lived outcome, therefore in PBL the process is considered equally important as the outcome.[9]

Understanding the Causes of the Protest

The recent violent protests that Ethiopia has experienced is associated, inter alia, with the developmental policy and its problematic impact on state-society relations. Ethiopia has adopted an interventionist developmental state model, which drew heavily from the East Asian experience, as the right approach to ensure an economic and political renaissance of the country. Though this model enabled Ethiopia to register impressive economic growth, an average of 10 percent growth for over a decade, it has exhibited some limitations that caused major discontents among the wider public, which eventually led to violent protests.

One of the limitations of a developmental state in general and the Ethiopian developmental state in particular, is the fact that formal state-society relations are limited to political and business elites. Accordingly, the broader citizenry and civil societies, which play significant roles in bridging the rift between state and

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[4] Olonisakin, Funmi (2015), 'Re-Conceptualizing Leadership for Effective Peace-making and Human Security in Africa', *Strategic Review for South Africa*, 37 (1), p.130

[5] *Ibid*

[6] Northouse, Peter G. (2016), *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 7th edn. (California: Sage Publications), p.6

[7] Olonisakin (2015), pp.132-133

[8] Northouse (2016), p.6

[9] Olonisakin, p.131

society, are largely kept at the periphery of official discussions. This made the developmental policy of the country predominantly elitists and, as such, developmental decisions are made by a few elites on behalf of the larger public. The other related limitation is its top-down approach where decisions made by the elites at the centre are strictly implemented down to the lowest administrative unit with no room for the active engagement of the broader citizenry or local administrations in the decision-making process.

The elitist nature and top-down approach are in fact the influence of the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the ruling party which makes the assumption that the mass is 'unconscious' and hence, should be led by an 'enlightened' vanguard of political leaders. Extending the same argument to the Ethiopian context, the Ethiopian premier was quoted saying that since the Ethiopian public is 'too underdeveloped' to make well informed decisions, the 'enlightened leaders' are supposed to make decisions on the public's behalf.[10] In other words, the ruling elite assumed the role of interpreting the needs and aspirations of the masses and envisions the transformation of the country as it deems fit. The binary division of political leaders as 'omniscient' and the larger public as 'ignorant' is destructive to a synergistic state-society. In the absence of such synergistic relation, the political leaders cannot forge mutuality with the people they claim to govern which inevitably leads to misunderstanding, deep suspicion and political tension. The Master Plan is one good example in this regard.

The Master Plan which precipitated the Oromo protest has been a source of controversy and caused political upheaval. Critics of the government perceive the Master Plan as territorial expansion of the capital city into the Oromia regional state.[11] They also believe that it would evict the Oromo farmers from their ancestral land and alter the identity and culture of the indigenous people, not to mention the destitute life that await the evicted people.[12] On the other hand, the government defends its project claiming that the surrounding community would benefit from the infrastructural projects and service provision that the Master Plan envisioned to implement. These diverging views on the Master Plan are in fact the epitome of the deep suspicion between the state and society.

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[10] Cable from the US Embassy in Ethiopia (2008) cited in Lefort, Rene (2016a), 'The 'Ethiopian Spring': 'Killing is Not an Answer to Our Grievances''
[11] Kassim, Awol (2016), 'The 'Ethiopian Rising' narrative the Oromo Protest', Al Jazeera OpEd, 20th Jun; Regassa, Tsegaye (2014), 'Ethiopia: Why Resist the Master Plan? A Constitutional Legal Exploration', *Horn Affairs,* June 12; and Regassa, Asebe (ND), 'Why do the Oromo resist the Master Plan?', *Advocacy4Oromia*
[12] *Ibid*

The resistance to and mistrust of the project is mainly due to the top-down approach and exclusionary planning process. One cannot but expect fierce resistance in a situation where the interested and affected are not involved at all in the planning process and do not know the benefit, impact and implications of its implementation.[13] It was prepared by a few technocrats without engaging different political actors, stakeholders, and most importantly, the surrounding ethnic Oromo and the local administration who would be directly affected by the project.[14]

The case of the Master Plan is a microcosm of the serious flaws in the design and preparation of developmental projects in Ethiopia. It is a top-down approach where policies or projects are barely the outcomes of consultation and negotiations with the wider public in general and the interested and affected communities in particular. This encourages the situation being seen in Ethiopia, whereby developmental projects that are supposed to address the developmental challenges of the society end up sparking political crisis. Public protest become the main avenue by which communities are able to 'engage' with elites and their national plans.

The Way forward: Underpinning Process-Based Leadership

The main argument of this commentary is that developmental policy that underscores the ideals of PBL will mitigate the limitations that developmental policy exhibits, thereby reducing public discontents and ensuring sustainable development in the country. This can be done in three ways.

Firstly, PBL underlines the importance of leadership anchored on process in which results are achieved. It shifts the focus from the 'result' to the 'process'. Accordingly, it helps political leaders to assess their success not only based on the results they accomplished but also impels them to question how those results are achieved. As highlighted above, results achieved through coercive or non-inclusive means do not bring about sustainable outcomes; rather, they are a recipe for crises. These issues are particularly important in the Ethiopian context - past and present - where marginalization, alienation and exploitation predominates the political landscape. As such, the PBL perspective compels political leaders to work on engaging the concerned groups in a society, building trust, creating a common understanding and aligning them towards shared goals. Until the point where these groups feel that the developmental policy is their own and take the steps required for its prosperity, it is extremely difficult to mobilize the populace towards its effectiveness.

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[13] Regassa (ND)

[14] 'How Not to Make a Master Plan', *Addis Standard*, 27 June 2014

Secondly, PBL conceives leadership as two-way relationship between leaders and followers. It defies an elitist and top-down approach in favour of a broad-based and dynamic relationship between the leaders and the people they lead. As PBL shifts the focus from leaders to followers and their needs in a particular situation, a PBL oriented developmental policy will likewise invert the top-down approach into bottom-up approach. In other words, a PBL oriented policy will be people centred as opposed to elite/political leaders centred. The assumption that few political leaders at the centre are omniscient who know better about the needs of society while reducing the rest of society as mere transmission belt of the decision taken at the centre is a fundamentally flawed assumption from the perspective of PBL. The people should be considered as equal partners; and their ideas and suggestions should deeply shape the decisions of political leaders.

Third, PBL emphasises the importance of mutuality – the sense of common purpose – between leaders and the people they lead. PBL plays a critical role in forging a common goal by mediating different group aspirations in a society and connecting them with the state from which it is largely alienated. Mutuality, which is at the heart of PBL will enable the government to forge common vision among a multi-ethnic Ethiopian polity that might have different and, at times conflicting aspirations. In sum, a PBL oriented developmental policy will enable a strong state-society relationship, thereby ensuring sustainable development and peaceful co-existence by accentuating mutuality and dynamic relations between the leaders and the led.

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