

Making the case for Liberal Democracy as an alternative to Revolutionary Democracy



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These days it would be rare for one to surf Ethiopian affiliated internet resources and not find an article about neoliberalism written by a revolutionary democrat. One would be forced to wonder “what is all the fuss about Neoliberalism?” It looks some of the old tactics of the revolutionary democrats which have been relegated to old files are resurrecting. In the old days all revolutionary parties including the current ruling party and others like EPRP and AESM (Meison) were so vocal in reciting their opposition to Imperialism. News papers and party documents daily read slogans against Imperialism. True that Imperialism has its own evil nature, but, all the rhetoric against it was not truly aimed at it. It was used to create a mass movement by invoking nationalistic emotions and use the movement to attack the so called enemies of the revolution which have nothing to do with imperialism. Now the revolutionary democrats have come across a new term by which they can turn the attention of the people away from their weaknesses and towards the illusional enemy. Neoliberalism like imperialism is being used by the revolutionary democrats to attack their adversaries who have nothing to do with it.

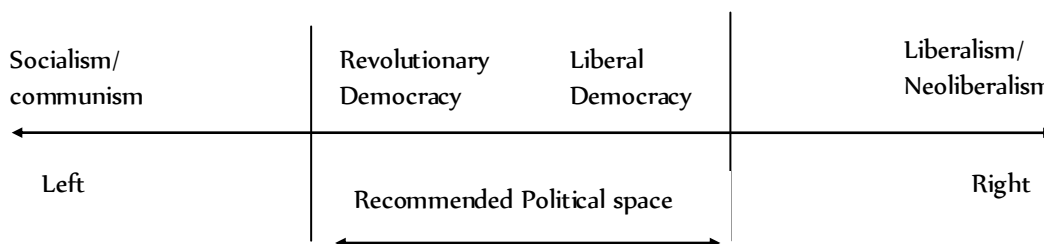
If the objectives of EPRDF are achieved in the coming years, Ethiopia will have majority middle class society. And it is natural that a middle class society would aspire ideals of liberal democracy. So, if there is any ideological paradigm that would compete if not win over the revolutionary democracy paradigm, it is Liberal Democracy. The wise strategists of EPRDF, observing this fact, have now launched a fierce attack on Liberal democracy. They strategized to use their old technique of “attention diversion” and “misinformation”. They are intentionally portraying Liberal democracy as mere market fundamentalism. They juxtapose revolutionary democracy against neoliberalism rather than liberal democracy. If the two real contestant ideologies, that is, Liberal democracy and revolutionary democracy, are juxtaposed, there is no question that the later would fall short of satisfying the contemporary human values and aspirations. So the remedy, the revolutionary democrats chose to mitigate the failure of their ideology to meet contemporary human needs, is “agenda setting”. That is, they set an agenda that has no relation to the differences they have with their opponents. And the agenda is neoliberalism.

In this short article I will try to present what I believe the alternative to revolutionary democracy is in Ethiopia. My argument is not that revolutionary democracy as the EPRDF practices is not a good alternative. Rather, I believe that EPRDF’s revolutionary democracy has numerous positive facets. But I also believe that an alternative ideology is very much needed so that citizens of the country can switch between the two depending on situations and needs of the time. I believe that Liberal democracy is a good alternative, if not better, to revolutionary democracy for Ethiopia. The purpose of this short article is to counter argue that Liberal democracy is not mere market fundamentalism as the revolutionary democrats try to parochially define it. But it is rather a multi faceted ideology that

has enabled those who followed it to become superpowers. An ideology that has been proven to be the most preferred ideology to create a free thinking and empowered society. In the subsequent paragraphs I will try to explain what I believe is the main difference between Liberal Democracy and Revolutionary Democracy pertaining to different continuums. After all, being liberal democrat is being able to see things from different perspectives. I will discuss both revolutionary democracy and Liberal democracy in the political, Social and economical continuums and finally try to make a case for liberal democracy as an alternative ideology.

Liberal democracy and revolutionary democracy in the political continuum

The two extreme ends of the political ideology continuum are communism/socialism on one end and Liberalism on the other end. The two words have lost their true meaning due to the contemporary global political domination of the western liberalism. Most people, these days, think of communism as evilish ideology and liberalism as a noble one. But I challenge this notion. I see communism as a political system in which individual interests are succumbed to the common interests of the society, and, Liberalism as a political system in which group interests are traded off for the individual interests. Both paradigms try to portray the image of the other as an undemocratic or unfair. Well, I agree with both, because complete communism would be autocracy and complete liberalism would be anarchy. I believe that we should build a political environment where moderates of both paradigms can coexist. That means we need to stay away from extremes of both, liberalism and communism/socialism.



If we agree on the recommended political space in which moderates of both the left and right can compete for dominance, then debates about the extremes of both are waste of time and unnecessary. As far as I know, there is no political power that is struggling for implementation of complete socialist/communist state. Neither is there a political force that calls for complete liberalization or implementation of neoliberalism. All the hustle by the revolutionary democrats to ridicule neoliberalism is non-sense because there is no political force that promotes neoliberalism in Ethiopia. Having said that let me come to articulating the main difference between the two competing ideologies (liberal democracy & revolutionary democracy) in Ethiopia.

The main political ideological deference between revolutionary democrats and liberal democrats in Ethiopia is that the revolutionary democrats give precedence to group rights whereas liberal democrats promote individual rights. The FDRE constitution, which is a reflection of the ideology of the revolutionary democrats, in its first chapter states that the constitution is ratified by the “Nations, Nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia”. One would wonder, what “Nations” is it talking about? For the reason that Ethiopia was a single nation and that there were no other nations that joined it. But

the revolutionary democrats, arrogant as they may have been then, considered the ethnic groups they stood for as nations. They divided Ethiopia along ethnic lines and named those ethnic states “nations”. Liberal democrats, including me, strongly oppose this premise. We insist that Ethiopia is a single nation, not a collection of nations. Were it the Liberal democrats who ratified the constitution, first chapter would state that the constitution was ratified by “citizens of Ethiopia”. So, Liberal democrats stand for the right of “citizens of Ethiopia” as a nation, whereas revolutionary democrats stand for rights of ethnic groups whom they refer as “nations and nationalities”.

Liberal democracy and Revolutionary democracy in the social continuum

Unlike in the political continuum, the two ideologies do not necessarily find themselves at loggerheads in the social continuum. The two far ends of the social continuum are “conservatism” and “liberalism”. Revolutionary paradigm can fit in either of the two or anywhere in between. There were pro-conservative revolutions like the Iranian Islamist revolution and there were pro-liberal revolutions like the civil rights movement in the US. But liberal democracy is more skewed to the liberal side of the continuum. In the Ethiopian case, the revolutionary democrats consider themselves as progressive thinkers struggling to transform the society against the conservative forces which they call “chauvinists”. Liberal democrats too, consider themselves progressively liberal. But the main difference remains on executing their agenda. The revolutionary democrats want to transform the society by controlling and forging it. They, with or without the consent of the people, implement whatever they think is progressive. There was never a time that the revolutionary democrats took ideas from members of the society and allowed free debates between alternative ideas. Almost every initiative of the government emanated from the central committee of EPRDF. Suffice it to say the life of every individual is at the hands of the EPRDF central committee which bestowed its power up on its cadres.

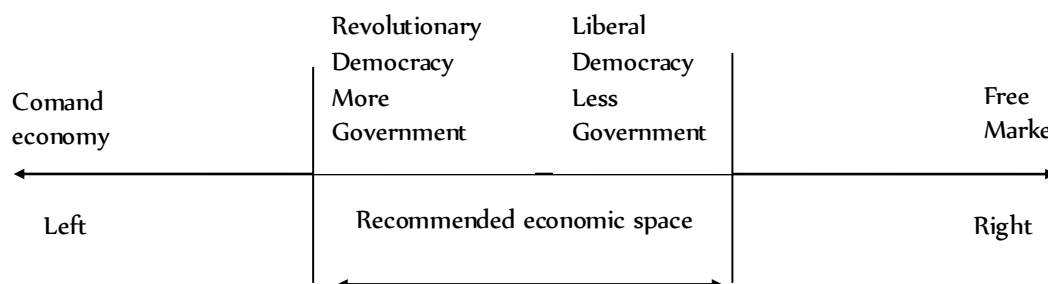
The revolutionary democrats, especially in the past five years, have built a heavy government/party bureaucracy that enables them to control the life of every family in the country. If they continue to implement their current strategy of pervasive control, the country would end up in a complete one party rule system. What is worse is that, there is no strong liberal democrat force that can provide the very much needed leadership and inspiration to invoke the natural desire for freedom of citizens of the country. Due to absence of viable alternative party, the electorate seems to have succumbed to comparative peace and economic growth which the revolutionary democrats managed to bring about. But to think that this situation will continue indefinitely is absurd. Sooner or later time will come when the electorate would say “enough to submittal to cadres, I need my freedom!” That is not the only problem, true it may be, that the current leaders of the revolutionary democrats are devoted and free from corruption, but the middle level rank and file of the party (EPRDF), which sooner or later would take the leadership, are known to the public to be corrupt. A recent incident during a meeting in the OPDO central council where every member of the council admitted that he/she owns at least two residential villas is a good example. Imagine having these corrupt officials at the helm of the giant EPRDF with all its control mechanisms. The need to reduce EPRDF’s pervasive control mechanism is advantageous not only to the ordinary citizens of the country but also to EPRDF itself. Because, when it comes, change in a free society is less destructive, if any, than change in a

controlled society. The revolutionary democrats need to take lessons from their internal and international predecessors.

As of the liberal democratic forces, they need to strengthen their thinking brains and organizational muscles. They need to come up with agendas that reflect the values of the citizens of the country and build a grassroots organizational base where they can operate inside the society. The current approach of top to bottom is not any different, if not worse, than the revolutionary democrats. A strong liberal democratic party or coalition of parties needs to be formed. The operations of this party need to be at grassroots level rather than mere party announcements and anti EPRDF rhetoric.

Liberal Democracy and Revolutionary Democracy in the economical continuum

The economic ideological continuum stretches from complete command economy promoted by socialists/communists to complete liberal economy promoted by neoliberals/market fundamentalists or capitalists. The main difference is pertaining to role of the state. The socialist/communist paradigm calls for the complete control of the economy by the state so that wealth can be distributed fairly among people. The Market fundamentalist side calls for the elimination of government from the economy and to the unleashing of the market from any regulatory limitations. Both contemporary revolutionary democrats and contemporary Liberal democrats have come a long way to moderating their respective extreme views. Now, the revolutionary democrats accept the importance of free market and the liberal democrats understand the importance of government involvement in the economy. As a matter of fact liberal democrats have been pushing for more government action to stabilize the inflation that occurred in 2008/9. Ato Lidetu Ayalew, a vocal liberal democrat has warned a year before the inflation hit the country and suggested the government take measures. He didn't defend the market to function by itself. Ato Temesgen Zewdie another liberal democrat asked the government to take fiscal and monetary policy measures to hamper inflation. So the argument by the revolutionary democrats that liberal democrats are market fundamentalists is unfounded at its best and intentional deception at its worst. It would be pathetic not to recognize that the revolutionary democrats also, understanding the importance of free market, brought many reforms on the economy of the country. Some sectors are blossoming because of the reforms on the structure of the economy. Hence it can be concluded that the two ideologies are not as in complete opposition to one another as each of them claim the other to be.



Even though the two ideologies do not have completely deferent perspectives on the economy of the country, there are some basic differences that are difficult to reconcile. The main ones are

1. The role of the state in the economy?
2. Land Policy
3. Government monopoly of some sectors

A recent article by a revolutionary democrat naively stated that “The idea of a limited government is a myth”. I wondered what it meant for the reason that I know for sure that “The idea of a limited government is not only a reality but a must” for an economy to exist. The question is how limited? My understanding is that the revolutionary democrats want to maintain the domination of the state in the market whereas liberal democrats push for the role of the state to be more of regulatory than competing with the private sector. This difference is what drives the other differences between the two paradigms. In his dissertation paper Prime Minister Meles Zenawi argued that a watch dog government would not be adequate for African countries. He argued that a government that plays a leading role in putting the resources of the country together is adequate by citing the success of some of the southern Asian countries in following that suit. A scholar who promotes liberal democracy counter argued by saying “ of course the state has an irreplaceable and important role but that role should be limited to fixing market failures and filling the gap where the private sector fails to fill.”

If there is anything that can be labeled as the main issue discussed and debated by our politicians and economists alike, it is Land policy. Albeit so much has been discussed and debated, no consensus has been reached about it. The leftists (i.e. revolutionary democrats) still insist that land should remain in the hands of the state or the public. They insist that the Land policy that was adopted by dergue and the current government has answered the “Land to the tiller” quest. Whereas liberal democrats counter insist that Land is still far from the ownership of the tiller. What makes this issue of special interest is that Land has been (and many claim is to this day) a source of not only economical income but also of political power and social status in the strata. A liberal democrat once argued, Land owners in the “gult” system of the imperial era maintained their political power because the survival of the farmer depended on whether the owner allowed him to cultivate his land or not. He said, at present the survival of a farmer depends on whether a cadre allows him to cultivate a piece of land or not. In both cases the cadre and the land lord (gultenya) maintained their political status through their ability to deny the farmer to cultivate a piece of land.

The other main issue of difference is the fact that the government maintains monopoly in some sectors of the economy. Sectors like power generation and distribution, telecommunication, and electronic media are under complete monopoly of the state. The justification by the revolutionary democrats to maintain this situation is that because the private sector’s interest is only profit, it would therefore focus on delivering the services and products of the sectors only to the haves. Hence, the have-nots would be disadvantaged. They also understandably claim that capital needs to accumulate in order to construct the infrastructure needed to distribute the products and services of the sectors and that it is the state who has both the responsibility and the capacity to do that. The revolutionary democrats defended their stand on this issue and land policy even at the cost of financial aid from international partners. The role of the international institutions and superpower countries here is of special interest because the revolutionary democrats attempt to portray liberal democrats as mere instruments of the foreigners (neoliberal forces as they call them). But what is misconstrued here is that liberalizing the sectors doesn’t necessarily mean allowing foreign forces to control them. The liberal democratic view of the economy calls for gradual exit of the state from all

sectors of the economy and allowing citizens of the country to be able to participate and invest in any sector. But all liberal democrats as far as I know agree that the state needs to play a leading role in developing some sectors but also preparing the sectors to be taken over by the private sector eventually. With respect to the foreign forces, the liberal democratic paradigm promotes global integration. But specific nations may have their own strategy of integrating with the global market. I don't know of any liberal democrat who wants our poor farmers to compete with the western farmers or our meager economy to be controlled by any foreign force whether western or eastern; neoliberal or communist. So the unnecessary effort of the revolutionary democrats to label the liberal democrats as foot soldiers of the western neoliberal forces does not hold water the same way as it wouldn't make sense if the liberal democrats label the revolutionary democrats as foot soldiers of the Chinese communist regime though both share similar views of the economy with their respective models.

Making the case for liberal democracy as an alternative

It is not my intention to undermine the merits of revolutionary democracy but to convince fellow Ethiopians to embrace liberal democracy as an alternative ideology and support in building a strong liberal Democratic Party or coalition of parties. Ethiopian political history shows that political forces take it granted that if one supports one thing then he/she is opposed to the other. It does not necessarily have to be that way. One may prefer an ideology but not necessarily in opposition to the other. If one orders a mango juice it doesn't necessarily mean he/she is avocado juice phobic. What I am arguing here is that because what we have is too much of mango juice and little avocado juice; let us make more of the later one. Because we have a strong revolutionary democratic party and desperately weak liberal democratic forces, let us support the later and build a strong alternative party or coalition of parties. There is a misconstrued premise that Ethiopian political space has reached to pareto efficiency. That is, in order for one party to be stronger another party needs to get weaker. But I challenge this notion. We can build a strong liberal Democratic Party or coalition of parties without weakening the revolutionary democratic front (EPRDF). The case I am trying to make here is that the present situation of the country calls for more liberal democratic principles to be applied in the political, social, and economical arena.

Ethiopia's political space is dominated by politicians leaning to the left. Since the early years of the second half of the 20th century, Marxist Leninist ideology has been pursued by our politicians. The ideology of the current ruling party (Revolutionary Democracy) is driven from the same paradigm. Currently, the country is divided along ethnic lines and ethnic interests are given precedence over individual rights. There is a first class and second class citizenship in the same country. For example a Tigraian in Oromia would be a second citizen to the Oromo and the vice versa. We Ethiopians need to strengthen a political party or a coalition of many that leans towards the right. It is known that Ethiopians have extremely diverse political interests. But contrary to that, the country is being led by a government that is under the complete control of one party. If Ethiopians want their political interests to be pursued, then they need to strengthen liberal democrats which are open to diverse views. Above all the Federalism system that created a first and second class citizenship needs to be corrected. And the only way to correct it is by fully respecting individual rights. In order to do that,

we need to form a strong political force that fights for the individual right of every citizen everywhere in the country. The ideology that promotes individual right is, of course, Liberal Democracy. So I call for more liberalistic political movement not because it is the only right way but because the current situation in the country calls for it.

Similarly in the social arena, situations call for paradigm shift towards the liberal side. Our cultural and religious norms are one among many reasons that made us deteriorate from great civilization to worst poverty. In order to alleviate our problems in the social arena, we need to allow diversity of ideas and thoughts. It is only through liberal democracy that a free thinking society can be created. The innovative behavior that is a corollary of free thinking society is as important as the progressive nature of revolutionary democracy. My argument here is that we need both progressiveness and free thinking. But what we currently have is a progressive government governing a fearful society. If the society needs to be innovative and creative, free flow of ideas and information has to be allowed. It is by strengthening our liberal democratic forces that we can make use of the progressive nature of the revolutionary democrats. In the social arena, similar to the political arena, we have strong revolutionary democrats that are progressive. What we lack is a free thinking society and free institutions. So we need to strengthen liberal democratic forces that struggle to create and strengthen free thinking society and free institutions.

The economic arena is where the need for liberal democracy can be illustrated more understandably. After the demise of the imperial regime, the newly formed government implemented a command economy where everything was controlled by the state. Individual rights were breached and the economy of the country plummeted. Even though the next followed government (EPRDF) tried to bring some structural transformation, much more remains to be done to bring the economy to the best of its potential. It can, without any doubt, be claimed that our current economy is dominated by the state. Some sectors of the economy are under the complete monopoly of the government. The land policy that was adopted by the communist dergue is still followed. All these facts show that the economy of the country, even though partially changed, is still in a state dominated/controlled status. If we need to transform the economy, more policy changes are needed. And the needed policies are not likely to come from the revolutionary democrats. The economy is far left than the revolutionary democrats claim it to be. Land policy needs to be reformed; Individuals should be allowed to develop entrepreneurship and accumulate capital; Liberal democratic movement that calls for liberalization of the economy needs to be created and strengthened. Revolutionary democrats and some economists invigorated by the global economic crisis are strongly criticizing the Free market theory. But, first there should exist a free market that can be criticized or applauded. In Ethiopia the market is far dominated by the state that it is impossible to call it a market economy let alone to debate how free it should be. The current economy of the country calls for liberalistic policies than socialist. That is not because liberalism is perfect and socialism imperfect; but because the country has not freed itself from the left leaning socialist economical policies and is still under a state dominated/controlled status. The private sector needs to be given the opportunity to play a significant role and gradually be the leading player in the economy. The state needs of course to continue to play its leading role in transforming the economy, but also should pave the way for the private sector to replace it. The current situation of the economy of the country calls for the creation of a liberal democratic movement that strives to pull the left leaning economy towards the right. If and when the economy is

dominated by the private and corporate greed ravages the economy, then we might call for strengthening the revolutionary democratic movement so that we can protect the interest of the mass against the few.

In summary

Our country Ethiopia currently finds itself far in the left of the political, social and economic spectrum. That is because the last two consecutive regimes it had are both left leaning. The Dergue has put the country in the far left corner in the economic continuum by adopting a command economy policy, the EPRDF has put it in the far left in the political continuum by adopting ethnic federalism. What is worse is the radical nature of the change the two governments engendered. This is not to undermine the some of the merits the changes brought about. Especially the EPRDF government has brought a lot of change to the betterment of the lives of the people of Ethiopia. But the point is that, because our politicians in the last half century have been left leaning and the governments we had are their reflections our country is located in the left hemisphere of the political, social and economic spectrum. And hence we need a political force that can pull it more to the right. The viable political, social and economic ideology that can do that without repeating the same mistakes of the leftists, that is without making the changes radical, is Liberal Democracy. So I call for formation of strong Liberal Democratic Party or coalition of parties. Caution needs to be taken not to mistaken the pseudo liberal democrats who claim to follow it but just because it is the vogue with the real ones. Because the real ones are not strong yet. I call the new generation to look in to how to form a new liberal democratic party or coalition of parties.

August, 2010

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