

The Great Impostor: (PM Abiy ?)

Excerpts: from my book: What a Life.

(Chapter 13 pages 543 to 566)

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When I was a boy, I remember watching a movie titled *The Great Imposter*. * Back then I took it as a very funny movie. After so many decades I remembered only the title and the fact that it was a comedy so in writing this chapter I looked for it and watched it again and read about the character. It was apparently based on the life of a man called Ferdinand Waldo Demara played by one of my favorite actors, Tony Curtis, who stars in the incredible but true story of the world's greatest big-time impostor of that era.

He left school in 1935 but lacked the skills that would get him the positions in life that he wanted. He wanted the status that came with being a priest, an academic, or a military officer, but didn't have the patience to achieve the necessary qualifications. Deception was the answer and he started early. When he was just 16 years old, he ran away from home to join a silent order of Trappist monks, lying about his age to become a member. That didn't last long. He was forced out of the monastery after two years because his fellow monks felt he lacked the right temperament.

It was then that Demara began to assume different identities, such as a monk (again), a sheriff's deputy, and notably, a prison warden, usually without the expected credentials. He joined the army in 1941, hated it, ran off and joined the navy where he got some medical training. Using false documents, he tried to become an army officer but was discovered so he went on the run. Next, he awarded himself a PhD under a fake name and taught in college where he befriended a Canadian doctor, Joseph Cyr. Cyr went to New York, and Demara moved to Canada, stealing Cyr's name. He became a ship's surgeon for the Canadian military during the Korean War. The exploit he is most known for occurred during the war, when three Koreans were brought on board who needed medical help, and he successfully treated all three—even amputating one man's leg. And he didn't have a medical degree! The list of his deceptions goes on and on until he was finally exposed and jailed for his crimes. When he was released, he made some television appearances, but eventually was ordained in the Church and became a counselor in a hospital. ¹

What's interesting is that Demara was not after money, or at least that was not the primary objective. His goal was prestige and status. His biographer Robert Crichton noted: "Since his aim was to do good, anything he did to do it was justified. With Demara the end always justifies the means."² Though we know what he did, and his motivations, there is still one big question that has been left unanswered – why did people believe him? According to Robert Crichton,

Demara had an impressive memory, and through his impersonations accumulated a wealth of knowledge on different topics. This coupled with charisma and good instincts, about human nature helped him trick all those around him. Studies of professional criminals often observe that con artists are skilled actors and that a con game is essentially an elaborate performance where only the victim is unaware of what is really going on.³

I mention Demara, because to me his story is the story of Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's prime minister. Of course the setting is different and there are different motives behind his behavior, but several similarities indicate that Ethiopians and the international community have fallen victim to an elaborate charade created by this man.

Who knows what he is really like? Abiy can look like a compassionate, religious person, but at times he can also be brutal. One thing is becoming clearer as we try to understand him: he is a narcissist, and it is generally narcissists who become impostors. If they get into a leadership role, they believe that they alone know what is best, that everyone should trust them, that they can save the day. When narcissists become impostors, they become complicated people with a constant fear of failing or being exposed. Those fears can drive them to the extreme, leading them to act irrationally, contrary to common sense. They keep on lying, telling contradicting stories about themselves as they try to project a different image.

Ethiopia has seen leaders of all kinds in the past, but they were not con artists. Our leaders, with all their weaknesses and faults, held firmly to the idea of Ethiopian unity and were predictable. History might describe each one of them as kings or emperors but always as leaders with empathy and a full sense of patriotism. Not much is known about this man called Abiy Ahmed who just jumped into the political scene, but we do know that in no more than a year he has acted more and more like a dictator around whom the future of Ethiopia revolves.

In some ways all people have the propensity to become impostors. People's public and private lives are often different. What we speak and teach in public or from the pulpit may be different from what we are like privately. When out in public, there is always the pressure to suppress our real selves.

But neurotic impostors feel more fraudulent and alone than other people do. Because they view themselves as charlatans, their success is worse than meaningless: It is a burden. In their heart of hearts, these self-doubters believe that others are much smarter and more capable than they are, so any praise impostors earn makes no sense to them. "Bluffing" their way through life (as they see it), they are haunted by the constant fear of exposure. With every success, they think, "I was lucky this time, fooling everyone, but will my luck hold? When will people discover that I'm not up to the job?" 4

It seems to be the way Abiy Ahmed operates, though it's hard to say what is going on inside his head. While a lot has been said about the manipulations preceding his takeover of the leadership, not much has been told about the person of Abiy Ahmed. In the euphoria that overwhelmed the country, people did not bother to find out who he is and was. What was important then was that the TPLF was being driven out and Abiy Ahmed's promised changes. But Abiy had been raised and groomed by the TPLF since the age of 15 and was an active participant of the system at various junior and senior levels. That should have been a tipoff to anyone thinking about what the future would hold. However, for the vast majority of Ethiopians common sense was in short supply. His talk about peace, love, unity, forgiveness, and healing the wounds of hate and division enchanted the audience. It was magic. The euphoria showed the level of anguish, pain, and despair of the people who had suffered 27 years of oppression, torture, imprisonment, and rampant corruption. At that moment anybody with that kind of message would have been a popular leader. But this one was eloquent, handsome, charming, and used words that people had yearned and prayed for. ---

“Machiavelli wrote in detail as to why it is foolish to expect powerful men to be good. He believed countries led by virtuous leaders would be swallowed up by their neighbors or by factions within their borders. “States, [Machiavelli] argued, can lie and cheat and have to if they are to survive. He rejected the heart of classical humanism: Cicero’s claim that if we act from a thirst for virtue (wisdom, courage, justice, temperance, the four cardinal virtues described by Cicero in his Moral Obligation.” 5

Machiavelli’s advice doesn’t work well anymore, not in the long term. The modern answers to the temptations of power do not lie in the persuasiveness of great thinkers but in the reality of our times. Every African leader should ask themselves if they want to go down in history as one of Lord Acton’s corrupt “bad men” or as someone who fought the corruption that is ruining so many countries.

I have no doubt that many politicians will take issue with my strong opinion of the current Ethiopian leadership. They may say that it is no different than other countries in Africa, where most of the leaders are characterised by the desire to achieve and hold power. They are firmly loyal to their own ethnic group, which they imagine to be superior, and they distrust others. Even the best-intentioned leaders who possess all the moral virtues of a saint may at times act contrary to the promises they made to the people they are supposed to serve. But unbridled authority will go beyond that when the leader does not have the best intentions in mind for his people. When a leader is corrupt to a high degree, the people around him also want a share of the big pie and since he cannot stay in power without their loyalty, he allows them to be corrupt as well. Such a situation can lead to what amounts to the capture of the state by these corrupt followers. It becomes a shortcut to wealth. There is nothing much that the leader can do. These are the men and women who cover for him, his “lines of defense,” and the leader will be forced to either protect them or eliminate them.

Perhaps he is not so much an impostor as a sophist, as one commentator recently suggested. 6 The sophists were those men in ancient Greece who were good with words and could twist them whichever way they wanted to win an argument, playing on an audience’s emotion without any concern for the truth. His speech at his ascension to power galvanized almost the entire population, but in later months it became clear that he was adapting different speeches to different audiences. In his acceptance speech he glorified Emperor Menelik and Emperor Haile Selassie and repeated his praise on a few other occasions when addressing the public in Amharic, the official language. But when he addressed his Oromo constituency in Afaan Oromo he depicted these same leaders as enemies and, implicitly, the Amharas as oppressors. Perhaps he thought that in this way he could calm some of the political tensions in the country, but it has backfired, triggering fear of the “other” among Amharas, Tigrayans, and Oromos and elevating tensions to the breaking point. 7

PM Abiy’s most brazen act of deception was when he or his colleagues dreamed up a fake YouTube video with a bogus interviewer posing as a journalist from the *Atlantic Magazine*. The Prime Minister is very impressive and speaks with his usual eloquence about local and global affairs, but it was discovered that his replies were taken word-for-word from interviews with Henry Kissinger, an article by Russell Brand, and excerpts from the book *Soft Power* by Joseph Nye which Abiy is reading from a teleprompter! Or something similar. -----

Trying to answer the question why authoritarian leaders lie, Political Science Professor Xavier Marquez writes: Western political thought has three main arguments about why lying may be

useful. First, some kinds of lies can hold political systems together: Myths such as Plato's "Noble Lie" can cement shared values among citizens. Second, lies can be strategically valuable. This idea is represented by Machiavelli's argument that princes should lie when necessary to achieve their goals. Finally, lies can cement the loyalty of subordinates.⁹-----

Over time these repeated lies and propaganda create a myth about the leadership like it has in North Korea and surprisingly in the most democratic country in the world, the USA under Trump. But lies will never prevent authoritarianism from collapsing. When the realities on the ground and the myth collide and when the lives of people are getting worse and not better, when even the most opportunistic of the elites cannot take it anymore, the system will fall apart and usually violently as it did in Libya, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and many other countries. Abiy's obvious lies and the myth of prosperity that he is trying to create will soon collapse and give rise to chaos. That is beginning now in Ethiopia and the questions that are being asked are where the country is heading and whether there will be civil war(though many believe that there is already a civil war with Oromo extremists trying to exterminate and displace Amharas living in Oromia and the war between government and the rebels in Tigray who have also displaced hundreds of thousands of Amharas from their and are architects of the extermination of Amharas, an ideology embraced by Abiy Ahmed who took it to the extreme level)) or whether the resilience and the ties that have bound the people for centuries are stronger than the fake narrative sponsored by the political leaders, primarily by the OLF (ODP) that Abiy leads and the TPLF.

No matter how much Abiy and his government try to distract people's attention and no matter how much they try to destroy evidence, fabricate stories, and imprison or tarnish the images of those who tell the truth through his hired attack dogs, there will still be overwhelming evidence (video, interviews, images, prints, etc) to show the world that genocide and crimes against humanity were and are being committed in Ethiopia under his leadership and with his knowledge. Under an expedient international court with access to all the evidence his actions or inactions will put him and his senior government officials and his 'republican guards' in prison for the rest of their lives if they survive the wrath of the people.

The End-----

"Detailed notes to this Chapter to be found in the book which has in total 861 notes.

- **The Great Impostor, 1961, comedy drama**

- 1 Tim Holmes, How to Become a Great Impostor ("The Conversation) Aug 22
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Manfred F.R, Kets de Vries , " The Dangers of Feeling Like a Fake" Harvard business Review Sept 2005
- 5 Geoff Mulgan, Good and Bad Power: The Ideals and Betrayals of Government (London :Allen Lane, 2006) 147
- 6 Getu Teressa, "Abiy Ahmed-A philosopher King or a Sophist": Ethiopia insight, April 5, 2020
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Tigray Legend, Twitter Post, " Abiy Ahmed is a Fraud" August 23, 2018
- 9 Xavier Marquez, " This is why Authoritarian Leaders Use the ' The Big Lie' Washington Post, Jan 26, 2021