

# **Eskinder Nega : Global symbol of resistance to ethnic inequality, oppression and injustice in Ethiopia**

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## **(1) Introduction**

Eskinder Nega is a well-known journalist, political activist and most-discussed political prisoner recognized globally for a quarter of a century. He is the founder and leader of the opposition party, Balderas for True Democracy. He was described by the international media as a leading advocate for press freedom and freedom of expression in Ethiopia. He has been in and out of prison over a period of 20 years under two regimes, including TPLF/EPRDF and ODP/ EPRDF [Prosperity party]. He has been jailed over 10 times by the Ethiopian government on convictions for treason, "outrages against the constitution", and "incitement to armed conspiracy", among others. In the past two years, he was arrested and harassed a number of times by Addis Ababa police and security forces for unspecified reasons. At times, he and his codefendants were accused of displaying a prohibited national flag and gathering in violation of an official state of emergency. The accusations are too numerous to mention all here. Amnesty International once designated him a prisoner of conscience, "detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression". Currently he is back to prison again.

He was the editor of the newspapers *Etopis*, *Satenaw*, *Asqual* and *Menelik*. He received several international awards for his passionate writings, dedication and bravery in the face of tyranny and continuous harassment<sup>1</sup>. He was dubbed a fearless journalist and campaigner for democracy!

In this reflective report, I am not going to write about his family background, education, or the terrible pain he and his family has gone through. This history is available elsewhere. I am more interested in why he is *troubled* by the political elites. Why is he perceived as a threat and 'troublemaker' by the establishment? What are the political elites scared of? When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed – the Nobel Peace Prize winner – used strong and threatening language for the first time, he did it against the soft-spoken Eskinder. What is it about Eskinder that gets under the skin of these autocratic leaders so that they continue to harass him? The truth? What is the cost of telling the truth? Losing friends. Losing allies. Losing freedom. Losing colleagues. Losing family lives, losing influence. Losing, losing, losing. How should we pursue

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<sup>1</sup> Awards and honors : PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award; World Association of Newspapers' Golden Pen of Freedom Award; International Press Institute World Press Freedom Hero

the truth in a world that has no tolerance for facts that contradict our preferred narratives?<sup>2</sup>

“When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it--always.” — Mahatma Gandhi

I have spoken to tens of people on the subject of ESKINDER NEGA. I’ve read most of his articles. I’ve followed the news about him. I’ve analyzed some of his public speech using discourse analysis methods. There are diverse views about him, as may be expected. Some of the comments on social media describe him on a spectrum from lionizing him as *the Ghandi of Ethiopia* to denouncing him as an *extremist adventure seeker*. In order to help me capture the *truth*, I used the *reflective writing method*. Reflective writing is used in an academic setting to examine responses to a new experience or piece of writing. Reflective writing can also be analytical when applied to critical thinking or processing used in research. Reflection is “a turning back onto a self” where the inquirer is at once both observed and an active observer (Steier, 1995, p. 163<sup>3</sup>’<sup>4</sup>), in this case the phenomenon, ESKINDER. Socrates (Plato, Apology of Socrates, 38a) affirms that a life devoid of reflective thinking is not a full human life, and on this basis, he conceives education as a process aimed at cultivating the habit of reflection in order to be capable of an in-depth interrogation into the webs of thoughts wherein life is immersed.

I have adopted analytical tools from two disparate fields to be able to analyze the ideals and characteristics of ESKINDER NEGA. The first is psychological, termed *Psychological dynamics of outrage against injustice*<sup>5</sup>; the second is *The Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale Model (SLBS)*<sup>6</sup>. The SLBS consists of six dimensions, namely voluntary subordination, authentic self, covenantal relationship, responsible morality, transcendental spirituality, and transforming influence. This SLBS model relates very well with existing empirical models of servant leadership<sup>7</sup>. After reading Herman Hesse’s (1956) short novel, *Journey to the East*, Robert K. Greenleaf coined the term *servant-leadership* and concluded that the central meaning of Hesse’s novel was that a great leader must first of all become a servant and experience servitude, and that this is central to his or her greatness (Spears, 1996)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*.

<sup>3</sup> Steier, F. (1995). *Research and reflexivity*. London, England: Sage.

<sup>4</sup> Boud, D., Keogh, R., Walker, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. New York, NY: Nichols.

<sup>5</sup> Samantha Reis and Brian Martin (2008) *Psychological dynamics of outrage against injustice* *Peace Research: The Canadian Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Vol. 40, Number 1, 2008, pp. 5-23.

<sup>6</sup> Sendjaya, S. (2005). *Leaders as servants*. *Monash Business Review*, 1(2), 1-7. Sendjaya, S., Sarros, J. C., & Santora, J. C. (2008). *Defining and measuring servant leadership behaviour in organizations*. *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(2), 402-424.

<sup>7</sup> Barnabas, A. & Clifford, P. S. (2012). *Mahatma Gandhi – An Indian model of servant leadership*. *International Journal of Leadership Studies* 7(2). Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Annette\\_Barnabas/publication/234090908\\_MAHATMA\\_GANDHI](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Annette_Barnabas/publication/234090908_MAHATMA_GANDHI)

<sup>8</sup> Spears, L. C. (1996). *Reflections on Robert K. Greenleaf and servant-leadership*. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 17 (7), 33–35.

Mahatma Gandhi's ideals and characteristics as featured in extensive literature depict clearly that he practiced servant leadership throughout his life; and I observe some parallel in Eskinder's leadership and moral reasoning.

## (2) **Psychological dynamics of outrage against injustice**

People can become outraged by what they perceive as injustice – such as torture or aggressive war – and sometimes this stimulates social action. Perpetrators of such actions regularly use a variety of methods, including cover-up and reinterpretation, to minimize outrage. The struggle between powerful perpetrators and challengers over reactions to occurrences potentially perceived as unfair can be called the dynamics of outrage. Because perceived injustice predictably leads to outrage, those who are deemed responsible have much to gain by preventing this reaction. Perpetrators with great power – governments, large corporations, militaries – have the greatest capacity to minimize outrage. According to my own observation and the numerous conversations I've had with key informants, Eskinder finds himself in this kind of struggle. Some psychological theories can help in understanding the political struggles that occur over the production and inhibition of outrage. Examining a wide range of cases, it can be observed that powerful perpetrators – in this case the police and the security force in Ethiopia – regularly use five types of methods that inhibit outrage and thus reduce the risk of backfire<sup>9</sup>: cover-up of the action; devaluation of the target; reinterpretation of the action, including by lying, framing and blaming; use of official channels to give an appearance of justice; and intimidation and bribery of targets, witnesses and others.

Eskinder has more or less encountered some of these methods by tyrants to inhibit outrage in his struggle for justice. He is currently in prison and the perpetrators lie about his action or inaction. They give the impression that they detain him for the safety of the public. They framed him and blamed him for inciting violence. He is and has been intimidated consistently throughout two regimes by the use of political language. 'Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind' (George Orwell). This has been the standard discourse for several decades in Ethiopia.

Eskinder has protested peacefully and organized peaceful public speech. However, he was stopped or harassed countless times by the police or undercover agents. This harassment is solely aimed at frustrating him and his dedicated colleagues and followers and curtailing their right to freedom of expression. "When governments try to suppress peaceful protest movements with force, they appear to trigger a backlash against themselves. This might be called the 'Gandhi trap'<sup>10</sup>. This is what is happening now in Addis Ababa with regard to his and his colleagues'

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Martin, (2007). *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield

<sup>10</sup> Bob Altemeyer, *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 310.

imprisonment. The police accuse Eskinder and Sintayehu Chekol<sup>11</sup> of ‘coordinating violence in Addis Abeba in the aftermath of the assassination of prominent Oromo artist Hacaaluu Hundeessaa’. Most people find it ridiculous to try to compare the deeds and character of Jawar Muhammed with Eskinder, the former a violent activist engaged in inciting ethnic hostility, the latter a peaceful activist, a global symbol of resistance to ethnic inequality and injustice and a champion of human rights and voice for the voiceless regardless of ethnicity or religion<sup>12</sup>. Both are in prison now for different reasons, and this very injustice is likely to trigger a backlash against the government.

As Reis and Martin (2008) succinctly pointed out, a small number of people may become involved in opposing social problems purely as a result of abstract, rational contemplation, but for most people, emotion is crucial.<sup>13</sup> A key trigger is people's reactions to what they perceive as injustice or unfairness, which can be described in terms such as outrage, revulsion, disgust, distress, or, more mildly, concern. All these emotional reactions can be observed in Eskinder's behavior. Whatever the term, an emotional response to injustice frequently underpins and drives participation in social action. Activism often results in greater awareness of and exposure to injustice, thereby fostering continued involvement, as we observe in Eskinder's passionate engagement in questions of justice and freedom. Outrage, a response to perceived injustice, can be a powerful force for change, which is why powerful groups routinely take steps to minimize or contain it. Understanding the psychological dynamics of outrage can assist activists in being more effective in countering these steps.

### (3) The Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale Model (SLBS)

Having experienced racism in South Africa and India Gandhi applied the principles and the strategy of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (holding on to truth) (Heath, 1944)<sup>14</sup>. He was imprisoned by the British multiple times when he practiced these strategies. ‘These servant leadership principles, applied in practice, forced the British to declare independence. At the stroke of midnight, on August 14, 1947, India became an independent nation’<sup>15</sup>. Gandhi was called Mahatma (Great Soul) Gandhi because of his great ideals and contribution to the development of India as a nation. I observe elements of that strength, humility, authentic self and integrity in Eskinder<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Eskinder Nega, a prominent journalist who is now the Chairman of the Balderas for True Democracy party and his deputy Sintayehu Chekol were also arrested on 30 June in Addis Ababa. Eskinder was presented in court on 1 July on suspicions of organizing Addis Ababa youth for violence, and again on 16 July, when the police asked for more time to complete investigations. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/ethiopia-account-for-all-people-arrested-after-hachalu-hundesaa-killing/>

<sup>12</sup> Lieberfeld D. (2014) Nelson Mandela: Personal Characteristics and Reconciliation-Oriented Leadership. In: Jallow B.G. (eds) Leadership in Postcolonial Africa. Palgrave Studies in African Leadership. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

<sup>13</sup> Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Heath, C. (1944), Gandhi. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

<sup>15</sup> Barnabas, A. & Clifford, P. S. (2012). Ibid

<sup>16</sup> There are many passages in the Bible which depict the servant leadership qualities of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who lived in the first century A.D. and taught His disciples, “But he who is greatest among you shall be your

Unfortunately, the authorities have succeeded in hindering him from fully applying these qualities to the development of the country. People I have conversed with firmly stated that Eskinder is *a free-thinker and relentless fighter for freedom of expression and a voice for the voiceless*.

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 27).<sup>17</sup>

I've asked tens of people about their knowledge of Eskinder as political movement leader on areas of decision-making skills: foresight; commitment to others; emotional intelligence; a sense of community; and self-awareness. All answered in positive terms with different levels of emphasis on all the above-mentioned qualities or characteristics of a servant leadership. He was most known for his commitment to others, in particular to the most disadvantaged because of a corrupt system. His emotional intelligence and a sense of community are also his most admired skills. "Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world...would do this, it would change the earth." — William Faulkner

Humility, freedom from pride or arrogance, is the ability to make a right estimation of one's self (Sendjaya, 2005<sup>18</sup>). Gandhi did not seek after influential posts. He is the embodiment of humility and integrity. Qadir (1939) writes, "One of the strong points of Gandhi's character is his supreme indifference to what people say about any course of conduct which he has decided for himself, for good reasons that satisfy his conscience" (p. 239)<sup>19</sup>. In this respect, Eskinder can be depicted as the Mahatma (Great soul) Gandhi of Ethiopia.

Why is he now imprisoned? What is it really that bothers the authorities so deeply that they choose to keep him behind bars? They can come up with trumped up charges but what is the true reason to perceive him as "dangerous"? When the Prime Minister of Ethiopia talked about Eskinder in a televised speech, he sounded irritated with Eskinder as if he was "a thorn in his flesh." Why? The truth is that Eskinder's main movement is to keep "Addis Ababa<sup>20</sup> for Addis Ababans", whereas the Oromo political elites – including the majority in the different Oromo political parties – want to control Addis Ababa. For the residents of Addis Ababa, this is insane<sup>21</sup>! This is why Eskinder has become the subject of such intense hatred. This is responsible morality from

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servant" (Matt. 23:11; New King James Version of the Holy Bible). Jesus modelled His teaching on servant leadership by washing the feet of His disciples, including the one who was to betray Him.

<sup>17</sup> Greenleaf, R. K. (1977/2002). *Servant-leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

<sup>18</sup> Sendjaya, S. (2005). Leaders as servants. *Monash Business Review*, 1(2), 1-7.

<sup>19</sup> Qadir, A. (1939). A statesman in beggar's garb. In S. Radhakrishnan, (Ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi - Essays and reflections on his life and work* (pp. 238-242). Woking, Great Britain: Unwin Brothers Limited.

<sup>20</sup> Addis Ababa, with a population approaching four million people, is also home to the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa and is widely regarded as Africa's diplomatic capital—and indeed the world's third largest diplomatic hub.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.zehabesha.com/who-owns-addis-ababa-by-veronica-melaku/>  
[https://www.persee.fr/doc/ethio\\_0066-2127\\_2009\\_num\\_24\\_1\\_1394](https://www.persee.fr/doc/ethio_0066-2127_2009_num_24_1_1394)

Eskinder's side despite the danger for his life. As servant leaders always appeal to higher ideals, moral values, and the higher-order needs of followers, they make sure that both the ends they seek and the means they employ are morally legitimized, thoughtfully reasoned, and ethically justified (Sendjaya, 2005). Eskinder's way of fighting with the oppressive state machinery is the insistence on truth. He is in agreement with the following historical fact about Addis Ababa, as are the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians, which upsets the ethno-nationalist Oromo political elites.

'Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.'  
— Aldous Huxley, Complete Essays 2, 1926-29:

Historically, the whole Shewa area was the seat of famous Abyssinian kings like Emperor Amdetsion, Emperor Dawit, King Zereayakob, and others. Going back 300 years, the whole Shoa and Arisi area was home to Amhara kingdoms and Muslim sultanates which were part Abyssinia. Old rock-hewn churches like Adadi Mariam in South Shewa and other old churches in Gurage areas dating back over 500 years are evidence of the presence of Christianity prior to Oromo expansion<sup>22</sup>.

"The Oromo Liberation Front wants to reiterate that Finfinne<sup>23</sup> belongs to Oromia. It is not only geographically located in the heart of Oromia, but Finfinne is also historically the center of Oromo culture and identity. Thus, OLF believes that Oromo people should have the rights of full ownership over the Finfinne and thus should play a full administrative role. OLF also want to make clear that the fate of Oromia is not different from that of Finfinne....."<sup>24</sup>

Ethiopia, and in particular Addis Ababa, is a cosmopolitan society where many ethnically/'racially' and religiously diverse people have lived peacefully for many years. Along the course of history, many cities like Harar and Addis Ababa have been a melting pot and today's Ethiopians resemble their ancestors in their immense tolerance of ethnical differences in spite of some derailed politicians and ethnic nationalist activists' barrages of fake narratives and treacherous and sinister motives. What gives the cohesion of the country is an esprit des corps based on a traditional culture, which in turn derives its solidity from the roots of a rich history as well as a common fate for all committed to live here. It is people like Eskinder who understand the dynamics of this fact and can save the country from succumbing to protracted civil war which can be so difficult to bring to an end.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Finfinne. It is what the Oromos want to call Addis Ababa. They actually aspire to rename the city.

<sup>24</sup> <https://kichuu.com/finfinne-addis-ababa-oromo-land/>

