

## **Machiavellian or Megalomaniac?: Abiy Ahmed on the Public Stage**

By Ezekiel Gebissa  
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Historical accounts of leaders exhibiting signs of burnout, stress, and even mental breakdown expressed in troubling behaviors of leaders abound. Roman emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero were reportedly engaged in senseless cruelty and lurid acts of sexual perversity. Egyptian pharaohs, Ottoman sultans, Asian monarchs, and European kings are said to have been involved in violence, sexual orgies, and histrionic delusions. Leaders are known to act erratically, unpredictably, and dangerously while holding immense destructive power, but rarely were they described as suffering from mental health conditions.

In recent decades, however, mental health professionals have used biographical accounts to diagnose past leaders retrospectively. Some have been found to have psychotic conditions and personality disorders, including paranoid delusions, manic depression, and schizophrenia. Retrospective diagnoses have also given psychiatric names to behavioral traits observed in modern dictators. For instance, researchers who studied Joseph Stalin found that he manifested a psychopathic personality with prominent elements of narcissism, sadism, and paranoia. In the same way, Hitler is said to have had “narcissistic megalomania.”



The recent rise of authoritarian leaders in democratic countries and their unusual behavior in office have fueled remote diagnosis of leaders. In the United States, thirty-seven psychiatrists published [\*The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump\*](#) amid increasing speculation that the president might have psychological disorders. Numerous books have since been published, casting doubt on the president's mental fitness based on reports of administration officials who worked closely with the president. John F. Kelly, chief of staff from 2017 to 2019, considered the president “insecure,

egotistical, and a pathological liar,” reinforcing the suspicion that the psychiatrists have harbored about the mental health of the president.

The African political scene has its share of leaders with bizarre behaviors and eccentric styles of rule in the 1960s and 1970s. In *Psychoses of Power*, Samuel Decalo studied the personal and career motivations and governing styles of Uganda’s Idi Amin, Central African Republic’s Jean-Bédél Bokassa, and Equatorial Guinea’s Francisco Macías Nguema.

Unlike Africa’s autocratic leaders, who otherwise demonstrate caution and pragmatism, Decalo found out that the triumvirate exhibited psychotic behavior devoid of any regard for the consequences for the states they governed. Rather, they sought to restructure the social order "to better conform with each tyrant's personal self-image or perverted vision of the world.”

Since assuming power in April 2018, Abiy Ahmed, the incumbent Ethiopian prime minister, has taken drastic measures to restructure the state to his liking and exhibited unusual behaviors comparable to his erstwhile African forerunners. He makes baseless claims, lies shamelessly, and brags compulsively. Abiy delivers speeches normalizing civil conflict, trivializing gender-based violence, and justifying the deaths of innocents with callous indifference. He lacks sympathy for human suffering and acts in ways that do not comport with the dignity of the august office he holds. His idiosyncracies have caused many to question his sanity. Writing in *Ethiopia Insight* anonymously, Mistir Sew has asserted that the "Ethiopian leader has some worrying traits,” concluding that he exhibits signs of a grandiose narcissistic personality disorder.

In general, leaders operate within expected realms of conduct, demonstrating statecraft, respecting evolved traditions of governing, and behaving in ways that are considered appropriate to the office they hold. When they deviate, it is possible to make evaluative conclusions about the personality, behavior, and actions of leaders without resorting to remote diagnosis of pathological or subclinical conditions. Psychologists classify leaders' actions that are “principally motivated by their own egomaniacal needs and beliefs, superseding the needs and interests of the constituents and institutions they lead” as narcissistic leadership, distinguishing it from narcissistic personality disorder or trait narcissism. In this article, I examine Abiy Ahmed’s leadership, highlighting his public behaviors that deviate from the conventional framework of governing and exercising and maintaining power based on findings of recent studies of idiosyncratic leaders that have emerged in the global public sphere.

### **Self-Selecting for Power**

The aphorism that “power corrupts” holds that good people are not immune to the corrupting influence of power. The remedy was to design a political system that makes power-holders accountable to popular and institutional checks. In the past dozen years, however, leaders who acquired power through democratic elections have challenged the efficacy of a system of checks and balances, raising the possibility that individual leaders can corrupt the system. In *Corruptible: Who Gets Power and How It Changes Us*, Brian Klaas argues that the burning issue today is that the people who are drawn to power “are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it.” Their distinctive is

that they tend to self-select into positions of power and are more likely than the average person to seek and obtain power.

It is public knowledge that Abiy Ahmed became prime minister after he was elected as chairperson of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). But Abiy's story is one of self-selection. He asserts that his mother told him when he was seven years old that he would be the seventh king of Ethiopia. He also tells a story of his teachers selecting him to grade the work of students above his grade because of his maturity above his age, reinforcing his mother's prediction. Parents are invariably well-wishers for their children. In Abiy's case, a parent's wish became his life's goal. He pursued the infantile goal of becoming a king with unqualified certainty. He did not seek to provide any rationale for what he wanted to accomplish as prime minister. Driven by an immature self-view, Abiy devoted his life to making his mother's wishes come true. Binyam Twolde, his coworker at the Intelligence Network Security Agency (INSA), says Abiy Ahmed "*dedicated his life fully to making his mother's dream come true. Nothing else mattered to him. Everything he did was meant to be a stepping stone to becoming prime minister. He worked to achieve this goal as if he would be dead if he didn't become prime minister.*" Throughout his life, he pursued an infantile self-view that never matured through inquiry and considered choice.

Self-selection is also evident in many of Abiy's self-description. He became prime minister following a popular unrest that had engulfed the country for several years. However, the prime minister does not believe he owes his position to the popular demand for change that forced the selection of a new party leader. He tells his friends that his rise to power was solely the product of his own efforts. Milkessa Midhega, a former EPRDF official, recalled in a television interview that Abiy summoned him to his office and told him: "*I attained this office through my own singular effort. No one helped me along the way. Now, I have renovated the office to reflect my work ethic. No force would be able to drag me out of this office until I have completed implanting my vision of transforming this country.*" Those who know the horse trade and intra-party maneuvers confirm that Abiy has done a good job of self-selecting for the job.

Once the self-selection put him at the helm, Abiy made a habit of pronouncing that he was the first of a kind among Ethiopia's leaders, suggesting he was selected for the task of singularly transforming Ethiopia. In a 2018 meeting with Ethiopians in Minneapolis, he described himself as the first Ethiopian leader to mingle with citizens freely, discuss issues, and answer their questions, adding, "*The government in power is one that any citizen can admonish and correct when problems arise. You've just witnessed history today by making a prime minister sit down and grill him with questions. This is unprecedented in our history.*" In fact, history remembers the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who always traveled to rural Ethiopia to meet with and listen to farmers and pastoralists of the lowlands whom he considered his power base. Abiy resented Meles' long shadow in Ethiopian politics. By claiming his interaction with the members of the diaspora was unprecedented, Abiy was asserting that his place was second to none. It was an escape hatch from Meles' shadow.

On occasions, his self-selection for a messianic mission of transforming Ethiopia rose to absurd levels of comparison with historical figures who have changed the course of history. During the

Tigray war, hearing commotion among his supporters, he sought to pull a victory out of the jaws of defeat by recounting a Biblical story about a fierce storm that almost swamped the boat Jesus and his disciples were on: “*Jesus was in sleeping at the back of the boat. The disciples woke him up, shouting, Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?*” *Jesus was on the boat with them.*” And you say, “*Where was the prime minister when Dessie and Kombolcha fell? For those of you, we ask the prime minister’s whereabouts; he is on the boat.*” The analogy implies that his followers had little faith in their leader, who was in a fight with them. It was a case that divulged Abiy’s disintegrated ego that needed constant shoring up.

Even though Abiy never viewed himself as a transient leader, he never failed to affirm for himself he was the “anointed one.” Comparing himself with Moses, the leader whom God had sent to Egypt to free the Israelites, cross the Red Sea, and lead them to the Promised Land, he told his wealthy supporters in 2018: “Ethiopia shall prosper. We will find out how it will prosper together, but rest assured, it will prosper. If the country’s prosperity is inevitable, then why are we frustrating our leader? It is because you learned it from your ancestors and Moses’ followers. Troublemaking during a transition did not start with you [Ethiopians]. The Israelis were behaved in the same way.”

This kind of conceit flows from a personality trait characterized by grandiose and overly positive self-perception and deep self-absorption that holds a profound sense of entitlement. Berating the public may not be Abiy’s primary goal. His interest is to underscore that he is the “deliverer,” chosen to lead Ethiopia through a historic transition and radical transformation to the promised land of prosperity in the same way Moses led the Israelites to Canaan, the land of milk and honey. When asked to adopt a transition roadmap to ensure the success of the desired democratic transition, he responded curtly, saying: “roadmap is not a language of political economy. If the goal is a successful transition to democracy, I will be the bridge that gets you across. A roadmap isn’t necessary.” This statement exemplifies a case of messianic self-selection, born of parental wishes but never subjected to questioning the infantile dream and reconciling it with prevailing realities.

## **Maintaining Power**

In his *High Conflict Personalities: Understanding and Resolving Their Costly Disputes*, Bill Eddy identifies people who are more likely to put themselves forward to rule as high-conflict people (HCP). Their patterns of behavior include, among others, all-or-nothing thinking, blaming others, unmanaged emotions, and extreme behaviors. To maintain themselves in power, they manufacture crises for political purposes, describe a normal situation as a crisis, or identify an evil villain ready to precipitate a crisis. Then, they present themselves as the designated hero who knows the way out of the apparently indissoluble crisis.

*All-or-nothing thinking* in Abiy’s case emanates from the uncritical self-view that he cannot live a successful personal life if he is not a prime minister. In his view, sharing power and the trappings of power is akin to a death sentence to him. He resorted to manufacturing and perpetuating a crisis to shore up support and eliminate opponents. At the 11<sup>th</sup> EPRDF Congress in early October 2018 in Hawassa, Abiy Ahmed suddenly raised the specter of national disintegration. He said: “One

thing I want to assure you is that Ethiopia shall not disintegrate. I can decree this with absolute certainty. There is no doubt about it.” This was the opening salvo of a permanent crisis.

Paradoxically, the Ethiopian polity was more stable compared to other transition moments when Abiy started talking about disintegration. There was no indication of a dissension within the party. It reelected Abiy as chairman and resolved to strengthen the party under its new leadership. Abiy himself was enjoying popular support because his reforms were popular, and Ethiopians had great hope for a transition to a democratic dispensation and sustained peace. Even political groups that championed secession had accepted a federalized Ethiopia, returned from exile, and joined peaceful struggle in the enlarged political arena. In fact, there was no imaginable threat to Ethiopia’s unity.

For a prime minister with all-or-nothing thinking, the invocation of the phrase “Ethiopia shall not disintegrate” portended the existence of a villain hell-bent on breaking it up. In July 2018, Abiy began clarifying the villain that was determined to dismantle Ethiopia in this way: “A tendency toward mutual hate, before we have learned about each other fully, is growing among Ethiopians. Besides what we do as a government, the people must be vigilant to keep the peace in their neighborhoods. I want to stress that people must pay attention to intruding strangers (ፀጉረ ልቤጥ) and try to find out who, where, and when they meet anyone new in town.”

Reporting about the people killed in the unrest following Hacaaluu Hundessa’s death in June 2020, he repeated the theme of the existence of hate-filled villains, saying: “There is accumulated hate, accumulated grievances, rebelliousness, and a desire for revenge to settle scores on a range of issues. Some people seek to pit us against each other, break up our unity, and profit from the carnage. The people must know there are nocturnal beasts (የቀን ጅቦች) who want to do this.” The meaning of the loaded words gradually became clear to anyone who understood Amharic. The villains were political groups that opposed Abiy’s centralization of power and unitarization of Ethiopian polity.

The theme of a general crisis of disintegration had a focused dimension on specific targets. Officials invariably blamed groups “seeking to return to power” for everything that went wrong in the entire country. On June 23, 2018, a grenade allegedly targeting the prime minister exploded at a rally that came out to show support for the new prime minister. Minutes later, the prime minister appeared on TV and described the event as “an insider’s job, organized, coordinated, and executed by people in authority.” In parliament, he complained that he had no control over his office or his residence, which, he alleged, were controlled by the intelligence apparatus. The villain was the intelligence chief.

In a press conference at the airport in late July 2018, he alleged: “Some people seek to pit us against each other, break up our unity, and profit from the carnage. The people must know there are nocturnal beasts who want to do this.” Speaking in Hawassa to the ruling party congress, he asserted: “Nocturnal beasts exist in Ethiopia today. Make no mistake about it.” In time, the euphemisms, oblique references, and hidden meanings evolved to name the villain the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF).



Concomitantly, the threat to Ethiopia's survival became synonymous with Abiy's power when, on one occasion, he blurted out: "It is possible to dismantle Ethiopia only after destroying us. It is important to know that we will not allow anyone to break up Ethiopia while we are in power." This meant that he would accuse anyone who wished to contest his authority with the crime of breaking up Ethiopia and eradicating them from the political arena. The threat was clear, but the euphoric support for reform and democratic transition was so profound that even the targeted politicians were unaware that they were in the crosshairs. Everyone realized that the war of words was a prelude to conventional war when the deadliest, devastating, and destructive war Ethiopia has known broke out in November 2020.

Another trait that Eddy identifies in high-conflict persons is *blaming opponents*. In early October 2018, ten months into his premiership, Abiy assembled teachers from all over Ethiopia to "discuss" national issues. He expected the customary avalanche of praises, but the teachers focused on pocketbook issues, such as housing problems and declining income. Considering the teachers' demands as *lèse-majesté*, Abiy retorted, "The greatest problem of the Ethiopian people is that they don't know how to compare their leaders. A fair comparison would be to compare my performance with those of my predecessors at the same interval after taking office. If you're comparing my ten months in office with twenty or fifty years of others, it means you don't understand anything." Abiy's angry response shows he is incapable of tolerating criticism of any corner.

While blaming teachers for the lack of capacity to understand is strange, it is an indication that Abiy lacks tolerance for criticism and his critics. In his short six years in power, Abiy Ahmed has demeaned and debased every sector of Ethiopian society. He has described Ethiopian intellectuals as talkers bereft of practical knowledge, farmers as a tax-evading noisy horde, urbanites as parochial egoists, and the entire Ethiopian people as scatterbrained and creepy crawlies. In a parliamentary session, he summed up his views: "In the situation we are in now, leading the Ethiopian people is similar to wandering around carrying one million pesky ants. No tangible result accrues from it." Leaders do not dare insult their people. Abiy Ahmed does not hesitate to call them whatever comes handy to him.

Even in a supposedly New Year congratulatory message, Abiy does not hold back from hurling insults at the Ethiopian people. Justifying the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) he signed on January 1, 2024, he described them as unaware, ignorant, and shortsighted. In a goodwill message on the Day of Epiphany, he said: "When Christ was born, persecuted, and baptized, there were no disciples. That doesn't mean Christ didn't accomplish the work of salvation. If we wait until people understand, assemble, and coordinate efforts, we will not succeed in the work of saving the country. ... the work we are now doing to escape our difficult situation and become transformed into a new national reality might not be obvious to all. But the time will come when Ethiopia's rise and renewal will be visible to everyone."

In leadership contexts, the primary goal of managing emotions is to avoid outbursts and establish an honest relationship with counterparts. On umpteen occasions, the Ethiopian prime minister has demonstrated an *unmanaged emotion*, yet again another dimension that characterizes high-conflict persons. On October 13, 2023, the prime minister declared his country was entitled to its own

sovereign port, an inexplicable move but a classic case of unmanaged emotion. In a televised speech, he announced: “The lack of access to the sea prevents Ethiopia from holding the place it ought to have. If this is not going to happen, there will be no fairness and justice, and if there is no fairness and justice, it’s a matter of time; we will fight.” In response, Somalia declared its territorial integrity “sacrosanct.” Eritrea described the comments as “excessive and perplexing.” Djibouti claimed its territory cannot be infringed upon, “today nor tomorrow.” Rising tension forced the prime minister himself to recoil and retreat, announcing that “Ethiopia will not pursue its interests through war. We are committed to mutual interest through dialogue and negotiation.”

However, it took only a short time for Abiy to make a move that stunned the international community and destabilized the region. On January 1, 2024, he signed an MoU with Somaliland and told Ethiopians, declaring “he has kept his promise and acquired a sea harbor for Ethiopia.” The act reversed three decades of international effort to rebuild and restore Somalia with Ethiopia’s support, including the lives of its soldiers. The measure not only dismissed the sacrifices but also rebelled against the global commitment and effort to Somalia’s territory and sovereignty. As it turns out, Ethiopia’s benefit was international condemnation and diplomatic isolation, which allowed regional players to invigorate their military posture in the region and exploit the debacle to advance their longstanding interests.

On December 10, 2023, an Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) meeting convened to discuss the Sudan conflict. In his capacity as the IGAD coordinator of the leaders’ group of mediators, the Kenyan president presented a progress report. Abiy Ahmed reportedly said the following: “I don’t believe that William Ruto is an impartial mediator. The Sudanese don’t like him at all. No substantive work has been done so far that can be described as progress.” President Ruto disputed the characterization. Djibouti’s president backed the Kenyan president and thanked him for his tireless endeavors. Sensing that the leaders were apparently rejecting his maneuverings, the Ethiopian prime minister walked out of the meeting and headed straight to the airport to fly back home. Abiy was apparently upset that Ruto was selected as the peacemaker when he, as a Nobel Laureate, should have been the logical candidate for the task. It was a petulant behavior exemplifying unmanaged emotion.

The final trait of Billy Eddy’s high-conflict person is extreme behavior. Excluding outright psychiatric conditions, extreme behavior denotes uncommon, outlier, and marginal traits relative to what is conventionally considered “normal.” In Abiy’s case, it might be his penchant for lying in a way that seems consistent with the French writer Andre Malraux’s maxim: “The way to lead an exciting life is to tell big lies and then live your life so as to make them come true.” Most people insert their lies strategically because they know that truth exists. Pathological liars have no respect for truth and claim accomplishments that are patently and verifiably untrue. Among the plethora of Abiy’s lies, let us consider three that were severely consequential.

On October 18, 2018, soldiers marched onto the palace to appeal to the new prime minister about the rising cost of living, daily supplies, and other unmet needs. On the day of it occurred, the prime minister described the event as peaceful. Reporting the incident to parliament, he changed the story. He stated: “While I was in a cabinet meeting, armed soldiers, instigated by people numbering

five to ten, marched on the place to carry out a wicked task. The intention of armed soldiers who showed up at the palace was not just unconstitutional and dangerous, but to abort the reform that was underway.” The report to parliament was concocted overnight to blame an unnamed “few people who engineered a return to power.” It was a reference to the TPLF and one of the first steps towards a costly conflict in Tigray.

Another high-stakes gamble occurred in February 2020. While on a visit to the UAE, he told an assembly of Ethiopians the following: “What I did to help General Asamnew Tsige, his own sibling, did not do for him. People accuse me of killing him. I lost my job trying to prevent his imprisonment, released him as soon as I got power, and restored his military rank.” None of his claims could have happened. Asamnew was released on February 21, 2018, forty days before Abiy took power. This isn’t just a lie. It is a big lie about an event in which several leaders of the Amhara region and the chief of the Ethiopian military were killed.

The third example was in his triumphant report to parliament on the conduct of the Tigray War. He extolled the professionalism of the Ethiopian military as follows: “Regarding civilian damage, we have taken great care to protect civilians in an operation that demonstrated a feat unseen anywhere in the world.” After listing 18 towns and cities from western Tigray to Mekelle and northern Tigray, he said: “In three weeks of operation, the armed forces haven’t killed a single soul in any city in Tigray.” It was a dangerous lie. The day he was reporting this in parliament, Eritrean soldiers killed thousands of innocents in Axum and prevented relatives from collecting the bodies of the dead for burial. Where the natural human instinct is sympathy, Abiy Ahmed demonstrates total callousness to human misery and a capacity for extreme behavior that does not comport with normal human beings.

More than their capacity for unconscionable deeds, high-conflict politicians have the ability to communicate with and rally people around their depraved actions. They excite their followers but also make their opponents angry and ineffective as they get emotionally hooked and fight with each other. By communicating at the emotional level, they can form a relationship with people who respond to their messages without really thinking. In a way, high-conflict persons engage in a calculated seduction process in which high-conflict politicians tell people wonderful stories they want to hear. Often, such people are described as Machiavellian. However, a Machiavellian focuses on ensuring that the realm is stable and the ruler’s power is secure. Abiy’s psychopathic and convulsive lying produces the opposite.

## **Engaging Followers**

In *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes*, Maria Konnikova discusses how narcissistic and Machiavellian politicians engage their followers' emotions through the craft of storytelling. They tell them a story that they have a common identity and common fate, establishing an emotional relationship. The followers buy the story because it is their own story of triumph, which makes them feel like they are really part of something bigger. Through telling stories, such leaders excite their followers, anger their opponents, and render them ineffective. In many ways, politicians engage in a calculated seduction process, telling wonderful stories of hope for the future. Followers are ready to believe them without question.



The Ethiopian prime minister has found a way to use storytelling to mesmerize his audience. He tells stories about animals, stories that are often told to children in the process of socializing them into the realities of life. In this face-and-voice news environment, he has found a way to manufacture stories that grab attention and appeal to the brain. It doesn't matter whether they are true or false. What matters is that he tells the best of stories.

A few days after becoming prime minister, Abiy announced a breaking news story: "Ethiopia is beginning to pump out crude oil in the Ogaden and export natural gas in two years." It turned out to be a scam. It was such a lie that Ethiopia could not afford to import oil six years later when a cabinet minister came out with the government's plan to reintroduce animal traction vehicles for public transport, allegedly to cut back on combustion engine emissions.

The Ethiopian prime minister has the audacity to announce that "Ethiopia has achieved a technology of cloud seeding, which has caused rainfall in select regions," juxtaposed with stories of drought that killed ten million cattle heads in southern and eastern Ethiopia. As Konnikova states, the story does not need to be true as long as it excites the followers, at least grabbing their attention momentarily.

One of Abiy's favorite stories is about planting thirty-two billion seedlings and that Ethiopia is on course to plant fifty billion. It is a big number, so big that he couldn't find a buyer even though he told the story in such high-profile stages as a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) event in Rome while receiving the Agricola Medal, the Summit for a New Global Financing Pact Roundtable in Paris and the Africa Climate Summit in Nairobi.

An oft-repeated Abiy peddles the story of "paying down nine billion of Ethiopia's after receiving empty coffers," even as the country becomes one of three African countries that defaulted. His recent favorite is that he has "made Ethiopia food self-sufficient and a wheat exporter" even though his government puts out requests for food assistance, and the WFP reports that it delivered several thousand tons of wheat imported from Ukraine. He has no qualms asserting that Ethiopia will become a superpower by 2050, one of two superpowers in the world. It is an assertion that does not explain what will happen to the US and China, which are slated to become the first and the second, according to current projections.

We often hear that Abiy is a Machiavellian politician who is frequently misunderstood. As noted above, he, too, tells stories that Ethiopians do not understand what he is doing now, but time will reveal his wisdom, and he will be vindicated. However, a true Machiavellian focuses on ensuring that the realm is stable and the ruler's power is secure through prudence, cunning, skill, and bravery. Abiy's psychopathic behavior has produced the opposite of peace and stability for the country and a safe and functioning government. In Konnikova's words, Abiy is a con artist and a megalomaniac, and we, the people, have been conning ourselves while the con artist is conning us.

## **A Personalist Dictatorship. A Warning**

In his book, *On Tyranny*, acclaimed historian and leading public intellectual Timothy Snyder asserts that a factual world shared by citizens and leaders is a prerequisite for a democracy to exist. Where citizens and leaders need to recognize the existence of independent realities and engage in transactions about a desirable future, it becomes impossible for citizens to formulate projects or resist their leaders in moments of intolerable difficulty. Where there is no common set of facts, both progress and resistance become impossible, and this opens the way for tyranny.

Leaders who want to build an authoritarian regime try to make that factual world less salient and more about the emotions that will either divide the followers or bring them together. Authoritarianism depends upon people getting used to hearing the things that they want to hear. The leader engages the public to learn what they want to hear and gives them what they desire. Gradually, he shifts them away from critical persons who recognize independent facts more towards those who prefer hearing the things that they want to hear. When this occurs, the public sphere gets dissolved, and democracy dies because it does not function in a society where facts flow from the leader to the people. That is fascism.

This process became evident in a series of meetings the prime minister held with representatives of all regions and public organizations. Citizens were invited to a “discussion with the leader” in the capital. Before they met, they were taken around the capital, visiting the prime minister’s pet projects that have allegedly transformed the capital into a genuine African metropolis. By the time they arrive in the Great Hall of the Palace, the participants have already been transformed into “enlightened citizens” who cannot ask substantive questions but act as mannequins pouring out showers of admiration on the leader.

What we have now in Ethiopia and elsewhere in the world is a system that attracts con men and women to power. We need to be very careful because the people that we call con artists are not that different from people considered pillars of society. We need a system that blocks the con artists, attracts rule-following people, and equips them with the right incentives to follow the rules once they get there. And then, if you do have people who break the rules, there needs to be consequences.

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