

It is the beginning of 2019 and no doubt there will be predictions about our world from pundits everywhere. There will be economic and political forecasts and the analysts and experts will be making the media circuits to offer their “educated” views. Some will get it right, and some will be way off.-but don’t expect them to admit their mistakes.

In trying to understand what the rapid changes in the Horn of Africa mean, and while searching for the undercurrents (unknowns) that brought the changes, and trying to predict what the future of the region holds, this writer, who owns no crystal ball, is reaching to others for explanation. Scouring through my modest collection of favorite books I am re-reading Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s “The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable”. The Horn of Africa is home to hundreds of birds. But this is not about birds...Black Swan is a metaphor for the game changer.

Taleb explains:

**-“...Before the discovery of Australia, people in the Old World were convinced that all swans were white, an unassailable belief as it seemed completely confirmed by empirical evidence. The sighting of the first black swan might have been an interesting surprise for a few ornithologists (and others extremely concerned with the coloring of birds), but that is not where the significance of the story lies. It illustrates a severe limitation to our learning from observations or experience and the fragility of our knowledge. One single observation can invalidate a general statement derived from millennia of confirmatory sightings of millions of white swans...”**

Just because one does not know about something, does not mean that it does not exist.

Taleb explains the properties of Black Swan events-rarity, extreme impact, and retrospective (though not prospective) predictability:

**-“...First, it is an outlier, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence after the fact, making it explainable and predictable...A small number of Black Swans explain almost everything in our world, from the success of ideas and religions, to the dynamics of historical events, to elements of our own personal lives... The inability to predict outliers implies the inability to predict the course of history... Seeing white swans does not confirm the nonexistence of black swans...”**

Black Swans can be positive or negative and there have been many events in the Horn of Africa that can be considered as such.

In addition to Eritrea's independence in 1991 there have been important and decisive events that had ramifications far beyond Eritrea and the region. These events were for the most part unexpected, and left both foe and friend in awe. Suffice it to mention a few: The liberation of Nakfa in 23 March 1977, the 'Battle of Afabet, the demise of the Ethiopian Nadew Command in 1988, and the historic Operation Fenkil in 1990, are events that changed the course of history.

The most significant and most unexpected event in 2018 in the Horn of Africa is the downfall of the TPLF regime in Ethiopia and the ascension of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This “Black Swan” event in the Horn blindsided analysts, experts and journalists in the region. Some are still having difficulty understanding the collapse of a regime they believed was too entrenched to fall. How is it that these pundits could speak with certainty about Eritrea- where they say they had no access, was “secretive” etc. etc. but were unable to see what was happening right under their noses in Ethiopia, where they had access galore?

So who accurately predicted the fall of the regime in Ethiopia?

In an interview in 2002, GeneralSebhatEphrem, speaking about the historical mistakes made by the TPLF (Woyane) regime in Ethiopia, said that the pathway (????) for fundamental change in Ethiopia had begun- that the die had been cast...that it was difficult to say when and how that change would come, but that the course had been irreversibly set, that the end of TPLF was inevitable. He said that historical changes come from the things that cannot be seen, from the unpredictable, the undercurrents, or as Taleb says, from the unknown. But predicted, nonetheless the fall of the regime-almost 16 years ago.

In 2010, H.E. President Isaias Afwerki intimated the TPLF regime's imminent fall when he said:

**-“...although the clique [TPLF] sought to buy time through conducting bogus elections, momentarily suppressing popular opposition and controlling the economy, the regime is basically a rotten entity in which a few corrupt individuals and groups may give the wrong impression of possessing power and the hope of continuity. The visible corruption on the part of the TPLF has assumed a scope beyond redemption...”**

Again, in January 2018, H.E. President Isaias Afwerkipredicated the inevitable fall of the regime:

**-“...The biggest obstacle was the political and economic injections that were made to delay the unfolding circumstances. Major investments were made in the country; in return, these injections not only created the crisis we are witnessing today, but they also played a major role in keeping it under wraps for a long period of time. However, the “intensive care” that was provided could not postpone the inevitable crisis for an indefinite period...The government is perhaps in its last straw as it strives to hold a tight grip on power... All these efforts notwithstanding, the TPLF has come to the end of the road; It is Game Over!...”**

So how did Eritrea's leaders accurately predict the fall of the TPLF regime while so many of its patrons were taken by surprise? Because they were not swayed by prevailing narratives and were able to accurately gauge and read Ethiopia's reality...

The volumes produced by various academics, analysts and journalists about Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa in the last 27 years have been rendered meaningless because they were predicated on wrong premises. Taleb attributes their blindness to “confirmation bias” and “narrative fallacy” and belief perseverance”. He says there is a tendency not to reverse long held opinions, “belief perseverance”, even if the facts were laid bare in front of us:

**-“...When you develop your opinions on the basis of weak evidence, you will have difficulty interpreting subsequent information that contradicts these opinions, even if this new information is obviously more accurate... The problem with experts is that they**

**do not know what they do not know... Prediction, not narration, is the real test of our understanding of the world...the need to fit a story or pattern to a series of connected or disconnected facts...It's like they have a virus controlling their brains that prevents them from seeing things going forward—the Black Swan around the corner...”**

The Brookings Institute missed the Black Swan in the Horn of Africa when it produced, “Big Bets and Black Swans-A Presidential Briefing Book” for Barack Obama’s second term. Did that contribute to Obama’s misspeak during his visit to Ethiopia in 2015 in which he labelled the regime as “democratically elected”. Was he swayed by the briefing he was getting from his advisors or was it his own bias at play?

It was not long after Obama’s visit to Ethiopia that the protests began. They started in 2015 in the Oromia region and quickly spread nationwide, paralyzing the government, which was forced to declare a “state of emergency”. Ethiopia was governed by listening posts and the killings and mass detentions to squelch the uprisings continued. But one could not tell what was happening from reading the daily barrage of feel good stories in the mainstream media. Let us take a look at one such report.

The Vanguard’s Jeff Jeffrey, in his 2 August 2016 article “Ethiopia: Catalyst for the Horn”, produced this rosy picture of Ethiopia:

**-“...For the last 25 years, while the Horn of Africa (including Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia) garnered a reputation as one of the most volatile regions in the world, Ethiopia has remained a relative oasis of stability. It is now one of the world’s fastest growing economies...The current state of the Horn of Africa indicates that claiming it is free of its darker days would be foolhardy. But when viewing how Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somaliland are developing together, there appears reason for cautious optimism – perhaps even some celebration...”**

It was not because he did not know what was really happening in Ethiopia, he did. So while there was an abundant supply of information coming from Addis based analysts, diplomats, journalists as well as intelligence personnel and military technocrats of every variety...the narratives varied greatly from the reality on the ground.

Allow me to end with this from Nate Silver, the author of “The Signal and the Noise: Why So Many Predictions Fail - But Some don’t”, who cautions about the use of the abundantly available information today:

**-“...Information is no longer a scarce commodity; we have more of it than we know what to do with. But relatively little of it is useful. We perceive it selectively, subjectively, and without much self-regard for the distortions that this causes. We think we want information when we really want knowledge....The signal is the truth. The noise is what distracts us from the truth...even if the amount of knowledge in the world is increasing, the gap between what we know and what we think we know may be widening... We face danger whenever information growth outpaces our understanding of how to process it...the most calamitous failures of prediction usually have a lot in common. We focus on those signals that tell a story about the world as we would like it to be, not how it really is...”**

Black Swans have rocked the status quo in the Horn, making 2018 yet another historic year and this event has turned accepted narratives and long held beliefs about the region and its people, upside down. Despite volumes being produced about the region and its people...most of it turned out to be just a lot of noise...and the noise distracted many from the truth.

If against all odds defined Eritrea’s long struggle for independence, the most improbable describes its post-independence feats....and truth remains the signal.

Best Wishes for the New Year...