

Organizational Attachment and the Sunk Cost Fallacy in Tigrayan Politics

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The enduring loyalty many Tigrayans hold for the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) exemplifies the sunk cost fallacy in action. This cognitive bias leads individuals to continue investing in something due to past sacrifices, even if it no longer serves their best interests.

During the brutal Derg regime (1974-1991), the TPLF spearheaded the armed struggle for Tigrayan liberation. This shared history of sacrifice has fostered a deep attachment to the organization among many Tigrayans. However, the TPLF's transformation into a self-serving entity, as some argue, necessitates a critical reevaluation.

Those who counter that the TPLF can be revived from the 'bottom up' demonstrate the sunk cost fallacy. Their past sacrifices and the TPLF's past achievements cloud their judgment about the party's current state. This unwavering loyalty hinders the possibility of positive change and a more representative political landscape in Tigray.

The sunk cost fallacy, a cognitive bias where individuals persist in a course of action due to past investments, significantly impacts political and social landscapes. In the context of Tigrayan politics, this bias manifests in the enduring loyalty towards the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This article examines how this attachment hinders progress and explores strategies for forging a path towards positive change.

Sunk cost fallacy in politics and social change

The sunk cost fallacy is a cognitive bias that leads individuals to persist in a course of action due to previously invested resources, even when the potential costs outweigh the benefits (Dobelli, 2013). This phenomenon significantly impacts political and social landscapes, often hindering progress. By perpetuating ineffective policies, fostering resistance to change, and potentially escalating conflicts, the sunk cost fallacy becomes a formidable obstacle, particularly within the realm of politics.

Perpetuation of Ineffective Policies: Governments often maintain policies or projects despite their evident failures due to the substantial financial and political investments already made. This

phenomenon, commonly referred to as "throwing good money after bad," can lead to resource misallocation and hinder the development of more effective alternatives. For instance, the continuation of certain large-scale infrastructure projects beyond their projected benefits can be attributed to this fallacy (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Resistance to Change: Societies can exhibit strong resistance to necessary reforms or transitions due to a deep-rooted attachment to the status quo. This resistance, often fueled by nostalgia or a fear of the unknown, can impede progress and innovation. The reluctance of some societies to adopt new technologies or social practices can be partially explained by the sunk cost fallacy, as individuals may be invested in familiar routines and structures (Kahneman & Tversky, 2013).

Conflict Escalation: In conflict situations, both parties may be inclined to escalate hostilities rather than seek compromise due to the significant investments made in the conflict, such as loss of life or territory. This can create a cycle of violence and hinder peacebuilding efforts. The continuation of armed conflicts in certain regions can be partially attributed to the sunk cost fallacy, as parties may be unwilling to abandon their initial goals (Jervis, 2017).

Political Gridlock: The sunk cost fallacy can contribute to political gridlock by making it difficult for politicians to abandon their previous positions or to compromise on new policies. This can lead to policy paralysis and hinder effective governance. The frequent occurrence of political deadlocks in many democratic systems can be partially explained by the influence of this cognitive bias (Sunstein, 2001).

The sunk cost fallacy significantly impedes the ability of established political parties to remain relevant and competitive. A deep-rooted attachment to past successes, characterized by specific policies, leaders, and ideologies, can hinder a party's capacity to adapt to evolving societal dynamics (Kahneman & Tversky, 2013). This cognitive bias manifests in various ways, including resistance to new ideas, the persistence of underperforming leadership, and an overreliance on the core base at the expense of broader appeal (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). A party's history, electoral victories, and loyal following can create a powerful sense of sunk cost, leading to a reluctance to embrace change and potentially resulting in stagnation and electoral decline (Jervis, 2017). To counteract these challenges, political parties must prioritize long-term viability, cultivating a culture of critical self-assessment and adaptability (Sunstein, 2001).

Manifestation of sunk cost fallacy in Tigray politics?

The TPLF, a 50-year-old political entity, was instrumental in leading the Tigrayan armed struggle against the Derg regime (1974-1991). It also played a pivotal role in overthrowing the old order and establishing Ethiopia's federal system through the EPRDF coalition.

While initially perceived as a national liberation front, the TPLF gradually transformed into a Leninist-dominated power structure. The party achieved significant social and political changes but eventually succumbed to the pitfalls of unchecked power, evolving into a self-serving elite.

This trajectory aligns with Milovan Djilas' theory of the new class, where a ruling elite develops a sense of infallibility and exclusive right to govern (Djilas, 1957).

The TPLF's evolution has created a paradoxical situation. Despite its transformation, the party retains a substantial support base rooted in nostalgia for its past achievements. This adherence to a romanticized version of the TPLF exemplifies the sunk cost fallacy, as supporters continue to invest emotional and political capital in an organization that no longer represents its original ideals.

Breaking free and forging a positive change

The sunk cost fallacy manifests in Tigrayan politics when decisions are driven by past investments rather than future benefits. Instead of focusing on national interest and the collective good, we often cling to ideologies or past actions. To overcome this, we must prioritize nation-building. In the short term, our focus should be on three essential areas: the resettlement of displaced people and the restoration of territorial integrity, the delivery of essential public services to ensure people's safety and well-being, and comprehensive reconstruction and innovation for a stronger future. By concentrating on these immediate goals, we can avoid the pitfalls of the sunk cost fallacy and work towards a prosperous Tigray.

To foster positive change in Tigray, a balanced perspective is crucial. Acknowledging the TPLF's historical contributions while simultaneously critiquing its current role is essential. Overcoming the sunk cost fallacy requires a nuanced understanding of the past combined with a clear vision for the future. Open dialogue and exploration of alternative paths are essential for building a prosperous and equitable Tigray. A paradigm shift, grounded in a shared national vision, is crucial for overcoming the grip of the past and embarking on a path towards nation-building.

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