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## Should Ethiopians Boycott the Upcoming Fake Election in Ethiopia? More Crackdowns Lock Out Opposition Groups from Political Participation

*"If we do not have a proper multiparty democracy, this country is going to end up like Somalia. This is imperative" he said. "It is up to the people to decide on how many seats should be given to the opposition and how many to the ruling party." (Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn)<sup>1</sup>*

### **PRESS RELEASE.**

**January 16, 2015. Washington, DC, The Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) has no choice but to expose the duplicity and repression of choice in the upcoming Ethiopian National Election due to the dictatorial nature of the ethnic apartheid regime of the TPLF/EPRDF that has been in power for the last 24 years. The SMNE is non-political, non-violent social justice movement that stands up for the freedom, rights, and well being of all Ethiopians, regardless of ethnicity, political view, religion, regional background or other differences. We are very concerned about the future of the country.**

The above statement by Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn is frightening in light of the recent crackdown on political opposition groups in Ethiopia; however, his ominous prediction of Ethiopia becoming another Somalia without a fair process should be a cause of alarm to all. Even now, it is obvious that the **Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)** so deeply fears what could happen in the build-up or aftermath of the upcoming May 24, 2015 election that they are now training militias in regions of the country where they see greater resistance, like in the Amhara and Oromia regions. If the people rise up in protest to the election, they intend to use these militia groups to suppress the people.

In response, Obang Metho, the Executive Director of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia, states, ***"It is a potentially dangerous time. We cannot ignore what is happening. The hypocrisy of the TPLF/EPRDF is only making it worse as they do the opposite as the regime takes other steps to block political opposition parties—and the people—from actually 'deciding how many seats should be given' to the opposition or the ruling party in the election. Because of a wall of obstacles, Ethiopians opposed to the TPLF/EPRDF have no choices. The TPLF/EPRDF has literally locked them out from any political participation. They may have to consider whether or not to vote in an election at all since it is a fake process—from start to finish."***

If Ethiopians do decide to boycott the election, the regime will certainly scramble to force their participation, much like the staged mourning following the death of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Mr. Zenawi, the mastermind of the present ethnic-apartheid system where one ethnic group, the Tigre, is favored over all others, is a primary source of the present trouble. Currently, the **Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF)** controls the larger coalition of the EPRDF, made up of three other ethnic parties, as well over the entire Ethiopian political system and eighty-some other ethnic groups in the country. In public statements, representatives of the TPLF/EPRDF have claimed they have reason to believe they will be re-elected—because of having the support from farmers in the rural areas; however, the source of these claims may be shaky.

In his excellent article, [After Era of Kings, Is Multiparty Politics an Illusion in Ethiopia](#), Andualem Sisay Gessesse of African Review quotes Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn as saying, “If they [the opposition] want to win the upcoming election, they have to come to our base [farmers, which represents 80 per cent of the total population of the country] and compete with us,” the premier said.” However, the question is, how much of that alleged support is based on local intimidation and the use of humanitarian and agricultural aid to buy votes?

During the election of 2010, **Human Rights Watch** documented a strong link between receiving food assistance, seed, fertilizers and other necessary resources for rural livelihoods based on allegiance to the EPRDF. This included pressure to cast votes in favor of the candidates approved of by the regime. This past abuse raises the question as to whether humanitarian aid and/or other donor funds are being misappropriated once again in order to control the outcome of the May election. This would entail an on-the-ground investigation by donor groups, but should be watched closely.

Currently, opposition parties have been blocked at every point from participating in the upcoming election as in the 2010 election. This has included harassment, intimidation and arrests of political leaders, the criminalization of free speech by journalists, democracy advocates, editors, opposition leaders, and the media in general; however, the EPRDF has fallen to a new low recently in its pretense of following a democratic process for the election while at the same time, making sure they control the outcomes. Here are some examples of how it is played out, all under the direction of the regime-controlled election board.

The **National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE)** has the responsibility of overseeing the election, ensuring that the process is done according to Ethiopian law and in a non-partisan manner. However, according to information researched by Muse Abebe in his very informative article, [“Who are members of the Election Board that Perform TPLF’s Dirty Job?”](#)<sup>ii</sup> one learns that the current board members were nominated by the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and subsequently were approved by the Parliament, another entity controlled by the TPLF/EPRDF.

In the 2010 election, the TPLF/EPRDF claimed an absurd 99.6% victory, giving the TPLF/EPRDF 546 seats in Parliament. Only one is held by a member of an opposition group. Neither the Ethiopian Parliament nor the NEBE is independent, but instead are arms of the TPLF/EPRDF. In light of this, it is not surprising that the following NEBE actions have served to block political participation by opposition groups. *The following image of the Chairman of NEBE in middle, member of the ruling party on the left and opposition party on the right says it. The image was taken from Ethiopian social media.*



On January 7, 2015, the NEBE contacted all political opposition parties interested in participating in the upcoming election to a meeting.

At the meeting, a leader from the **Blue Party (Semayawi)** stated that the election board should not talk about the election unless they clarified the pre-conditions; for example, would there be an independent election board; would there be some financial funding allocated to opposition parties; would there be air time on TV or radio for opposition parties; and other similar questions that would tell whether or not this would be a free and fair election. The Election Board said they would not be answering these questions. In response to their refusal to answer critical questions, the leadership of the Blue Party began to walk out of the meeting in frustration and protest, believing any genuine efforts to cooperate in the process would be sabotaged. The election board threatened them and asked them to apologize. They refused to do so and left the meeting. The NEBE is still demanding an apology.

It should be explained that the election board may be more intimidated by recent efforts by the Blue Party to join together with eight of the opposition parties, leading to a crackdown on them two months ago. Many of the Blue Party's leaders were arrested at the time, but were subsequently released; however, the TPLF/EPRDF's worst fears remain—that opposition groups will form coalitions based on unity of purpose. Of course, the election board's harassment of political opposition groups and sabotage of any semblance of a democratic process may be enough to forge new alliances between groups.

Two of the major political opposition groups remaining at the meeting were the **Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ)** and the **All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP)**. After the Blue Party's leadership walked out, the election board proceeded to give those remaining their mandates. They were told they would have four days (on January 11, 2015) which they were to convene all of their members in a general assembly to elect candidates for the coming election. They were then to submit the results to the election board within those same four days. This included taking minutes of the meeting, giving details as to how candidates were elected, the number of their members present, and the names and offices of those elected.

UDJ and the AEUP attempted to comply. Both held quickly organized assemblies, but their efforts were thwarted by the NEBE. According to Ethiopian election law, every political party is required to have members from the electoral board present at these meetings as observers of the proceedings to ensure legal compliance in the electoral process. The NEBE was invited to both meetings, but they did not come, alleging they had something more important to do—essentially delegitimizing the heroic efforts of these two political parties to comply with an unreasonable process. When the UDJ presented their results, the NEBE told them they would have to repeat the entire process again. When they refused, they were warned that action would be taken against them.

Similarly, when the AEUP presented their results, the NEBE was not satisfied with their results either. They were also told to hold another meeting, but the party said they did not have the resources to do it again. However, these parties, believing they had no other alternative than to walk through the steps, both held subsequent assemblies shortly thereafter. Again, election board members undermined the process. They were invited, but did not attend. When results of both assemblies were presented to the NEBE, they were again rejected. The NEBE then told them to hold a third assembly. They both refused. The NEBE is again threatening major action against the leaders and the parties if they fail to comply. The outcome is still pending.

Many believe the reason that the NEBE continues to reject UDJ's submission is that the UDJ is perceived to be a threat due to some of its elected youthful leaders. One of the fears of the regime is that these younger leaders can mobilize the youth in the country, similar to Andualem Aragie, the former leader of the UDJ, who is serving in prison for 18 years. He is a very charismatic leader and was accused of trying to mobilize the public to bring the government down undemocratically. Journalist Eskinder Nega was put in jail for the same reason. The UDJ and AEUP have talked about merging together, now resulting in both becoming a threat to this regime. These are some of the reasons believed to be behind the election board's repeated denials of voting results submitted twice each by both of these groups.

### Attempts by the TPLF/EPRDF to hijack the outcome of the general assemblies

When the UDJ members came together, many had to sleep on the floor of the meeting hall for lack of resources and other arrangements. They followed the guidelines in electing their leadership, but soon realized that TPLF/EPRDF regime supporters were present, posing as UDJ members, in an attempt to secretly become candidates for offices within the UDJ. These undercover plants voted against the approval of UDJ leaders who were nominated at the assembly; however, these leaders were voted in anyway. However, as a result, some within the UDJ recognized these persons as undercover government agents and pointed it out publically. Because of this, the efforts to hijack the nomination process of the UDJ did not succeed.

The AEUP's meeting was also infiltrated by government supporters, posing as members of the party so as to claim the nominations for various offices or to stand in the way of others believed to be threats to the regime. Again, they did not succeed.

Executive Director of the SMNE, Obang Metho states: *“Despite regime control over every sector of society, the TPLF/EPRDF is going into panic mode, especially as they face the election. As a result, they are closing up even the little space now available. They know they would have no chance of being re-elected if Ethiopians were given a real chance to vote. To them, opening up political space for the opposition means losing everything; however, because donor countries like the US, as well as others, have placed expectations on them to give political space to the opposition and to hold a free and fair election, they are creating a fake electoral process for public consumption. They fear the people will rise up if given any opportunity and they also fear that a crackdown on opposition groups might cause an outbreak of violence if the people become united in their frustration. As a result, they are becoming irrational. It is a critical situation not only for them, but for everyone.”*

The TPLF/EPRDF controls all government and private institutions, down to the local level. This includes the judiciary, the military, federal and local police, security forces, the economy, the media, the press, the Internet, technology, the telecom system, the educational system, religious groups, the use and distribution of aid, civil society, customs, taxes, laws and the application of those laws to decimate civil society and criminalize democratic or anti-government voices. *The following image of a senior member of the ruling party in Ethiopia directing at the ballot box and Casket describe the reality of Ethiopian national election clearly. The image was taken from Ethiopian social media.*



The paranoia is so great that no act of courage can be ignored so when new voices emerge—like at UDJ's general assembly—shockingly brutal punishment can follow.

Ms. Woyneshet Seleshi is one of UDJ's leaders who attended the first general assembly. She had been elected to the positions of Deputy Director of Women's Affairs. She and another man were the first to point out some of the TPLF/EPRDF infiltrators who were present at the meeting. Both brought attention to the fact these double agents were trying to divide the people and to influence the voting outcomes so they might be in alignment with the interests of the TPLF/EPRDF. The following day, as she was walking on the street near her home, she was attacked by two alleged TPLF/EPRDF security agents. Despite the fact she was five months pregnant, Woyneshet was brutally attacked by these two men. Witnesses saw them beating and kicking her, including kicking her in the stomach before running away. She had to be hospitalized. Her present condition is unknown. *Below is the picture of Ms. Woyneshet Seleshi at the hospital waiting to see the Doctor.*



The authorities were quickly notified, but family members report that the police did not respond to their request to find the perpetrators, who some of the people had allegedly identified as part of the government security apparatus. To our knowledge, no action is yet to be taken. On the same day, the other man who spoke up along with her at the UDJ assembly was also beaten up. Obviously they had been looking for both of them.

This is the kind of government donors are supporting—one that will suppress the voice of the people even if it means two men brutally kicking a pregnant woman in the stomach for just speaking out against the attempt of the EPRDF to illegally influence an election. What does it take beyond this to condemn this kind of injustice and to stop fueling it with donor money, especially large amounts of money with no strings attached? What would any decent human being say about this? Should there not be some accounting for these abuses? What message will be sent to the EPRDF if all these violations are ignored or if it only elicits a mild-mannered scolding?

A Call to Action to EPRDF members, donor countries, and the people of Ethiopia: ***“The recent crackdown on the three major opposition parties in Ethiopia by the TPLF/EPRDF is so extreme and comprehensive that it may require strong intervention by a united, peaceful, opposition movement of the Ethiopian people as well as by donor countries who can leverage support,”*** says Obang Metho.

### **TO TPLF/EPRDF members and supporters:**

We call on more rational TPLF/EPRDF members, leaders and supporters to restrain yourselves and others from wrongful acts against the people of Ethiopia and any violations of Ethiopian law and moral conscience. These are the kinds of acts that will lead the country to violence, backlash and chaos, especially since the TPLF/EPRDF has already laid the foundation for ethnic hatred and division. Help us avoid setting off the ethnic time bomb people are so worried about. These are the kinds of actions that force people into a corner where they may believe they have no alternative other than to fight back. If that happens, the damage may be irreversible. The TPLF/EPRDF supporters must work to avoid setting off this scenario where you and everyone else will lose. Speak out against this for the sake of your future, the future of your descendents and for others.

### **To donor countries like the United States:**

We call on the US and other donor countries that are supporting the TPLF/EPRDF to consider how supporting the longevity of this regime is counterproductive to your own national interests. For example, the 2014 US Omnibus funding bill specifically addresses Ethiopia.

For more information about the bill see the following link: <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/141026-SMNE-Appraises-Semayawi-Party.php> It links continued financial support to Ethiopia's successful compliance with requirements related to advancing judicial independence; freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion; the right of political opposition parties, civil society organizations, and journalists to operate without harassment or interference; and due process of law. The newly passed 2015 US Omnibus Appropriations Bill also addresses Ethiopia, giving certain requirements for funding.

Through giving unconditional support to the EPRDF when they are in violation of the US Omnibus Bill of 2014 and 2015, as well as failing to meet requirements for aid from other US sources like the World Bank, the IMF and USAID, we believe the EPRDF will become a force of destabilization in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. No viable alternative can face the EPRDF on Election Day as none are allowed to exist so why even hold such an election? The EPRDF is no longer an asset to the United States as well as to other donor countries if it implodes.

We call on US policymakers to stop accepting any TPLF/EPRDF rhetoric that is based on lies and when in doubt, to require evidence. Here is an example of such rhetoric by the Prime Minister: *"The multiparty system is gauged by the process of the election; not the result. The result is up to the people... Therefore, I say democracy is not dying [in Ethiopia], it is flourishing and it will continue to flourish..."* (A statement by Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn to The East African, quoted in the previously mentioned article by Andualem Sisay Gessesse.)

Africa cannot be liberated through rhetoric that is meaningless and has no stake in changing anything. The Ethiopian people have been suffering in the name of the war on terror, the national interests of others, and because it is more stable than its neighbors—failed or failing states like Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan. In the long run, a failed state in Ethiopia will hurt everyone, including donor countries and multi-national companies with their own interests in Ethiopia. Propping up a dictatorship will not bring lasting peace. It is time for those with a footprint in the country to demand that Ethiopia genuinely open up political space, release its political prisoners, and be held accountable for the use or abuse of donor funds.

According to Obang Metho, *"If the Ethiopian regime does not follow the requirements, the new US Omnibus law should be put into action. If an investigation reveals non-compliance with the conditions of the law, action should be taken to cut the flow of money until there is compliance. For the sake of the future stability of Ethiopia and the Horn, this should be taken seriously or donors will co-own the results of it. It is better to avert the crisis, but the time is running out."*

## To the Ethiopian people and political opposition parties

We call on the Ethiopian people to stand up for their future and demand freedom. Although we call on others for support; freedom is not delivered on a platter by outsiders, like foreign aid that the TPLF/EPRDF is addicted to, but must be demanded by the people. The number one fear of the TPLF-run EPRDF is not the gun, but the people; however, they are now faced with some very serious problems. The desperation of Ethiopians is rising because of the harsh living conditions, which are affecting everyone, including those in power. For example, the price of gasoline is very high in Ethiopia; so is the cost of food. Many of those holding on to the regime by the barrel of the gun, are not doing this willingly, but instead out of fear because they see no alternative. Such people should see the impossibility of such a regime holding on to power indefinitely. They should also see it as morally wrong and withdraw their support and be instrumental in seeking resolution with the opposition.

In the case of Ethiopians, if many people stand together, it will be harder for the TPLF/EPRDF to isolate the few that are speaking out, resulting in them being jailed or fleeing the country. However, if all the people stand up as one, the regime will have no choice but to submit to the people. It is no different than in other countries where the people have stood together.

All the political opposition leaders, or those in the TPLF or EPRDF who claim to care, should put their differences aside. We have called on Ethiopian political leaders to do this before, see the links for the letter <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/140501-Open-letter-to-political-leaders-in-Ethiopia.php> and have also called on members of the TPLF/EPRDF to do what is right in two separate letters. See the following link <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/140802-Open-Letter-to-the-Chairman-of-the-TPLFBR.pdf> for the letter to members of the TPLF/EPRDF. We make this call again because of the hardship, pain, harassment, torture, and the misery of so many. Can we be unified by what is good, honorable, just and what actually works in making life together possible?

It is a matter of coming together so there is sufficient leverage to be heard. This will also create the impetus for others to listen—that means those funding the TPLF/EPRDF. Whether or not this would result in boycotting the election, or some other plan, could be debated and the best plan adopted. This is a call for Ethiopians to join a movement of the people; not to liberate an ethnicity, but to liberate humanity so we can work together to create an Ethiopia where not only **the humanity of each person is valued, but where justice is equally accessible to all people for no one is free until all are free.**

The future of the country is so grim and dark, but to avoid it, people **must reach out to talk to each other rather than about each other** so together we can build a better future for the common good of all the people of Ethiopia; not only for one ethnic group or for a few elite and their cronies at the top.

May God help us to embrace the humanity of others; the pathway to healing, reconciliation and flourishing together.

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For more information, contact Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE. Email: [Obang@solidaritymovement.org](mailto:Obang@solidaritymovement.org)

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<sup>i</sup> <http://asokoinsight.com/news/era-kings-multiparty-politics-illusion-ethiopia/>; After Era of Kings, is Multiparty Politics an Illusion in Ethiopia? (Africa Review) by Andualem Sisay Gessesse, January 13, 2015

<sup>ii</sup> <http://ecadforum.com/2015/01/18/who-are-members-of-the-election-board-that-perform-tplfs-dirty-job/>; “Who are members of the Election Board that Perform TPLF’s Dirty Job?” by Muse Abebe, January 18, 2015