



AUTHORITARIAN ETHIOPIAN REGIME CADRES FORCE PEOPLE TO CAST OPEN BALLOTS IN ADVANCE OF ELECTION

PRESS RELEASE.

May 12, 2015, Washington, DC. The Ethiopian National Election is on May 24, 2015, less than two weeks away, but the authoritarian regime, under the control of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) for the last 23 years, appears to be panicking. The political mood of the Ethiopian people is feistier than ever as they see the election to be a totally controlled process, hardly worthy of their participation. Yet, even despite the scrupulous closing down of all political space, the EPRDF is obviously still scared and has come up with a new plan to further protect themselves from the vote of the people, even while pretending otherwise.

Regime cadres, all on salary, have been organized so that one cadre is responsible to ensure five people fall into line with the goals of the EPRDF. These cadres have been going to the homes of those people assigned to them with election ballots for the May 24th election. The people are told they must immediately cast their ballots and to stay home on Election Day. Reportedly, the ballots are not secret, but are collected by these agents who also write down their names. Anyone who refuses to cast their ballot or who tries to vote on Election Day will face serious consequences like the loss of jobs, opportunities, or other benefits. Some are threatened with punitive actions, which in this country might mean arrests, beatings or other abuse. With the full authority of the regime behind them, they are able to harass and intimidate these persons in order to achieve full compliance.

This is the first election since the death of the former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the atmosphere of discontent in the country is greater than ever. Since the 2005 election, where some limited space was allowed for the opposition, the EPRDF has increasingly tightened the political space. In 2010, the EPRDF clamped down on nearly all political space to opponents and according to documentation by Human Rights Watch, used humanitarian aid as a means to manipulate votes. *The unpopular EPRDF then claimed an absurd 99.6% electoral victory, giving only one opposition member a place in the 547-member parliament. However, in 2015, the EPRDF has restricted the playing field even more. If one thought of it as a soccer field; there would be only one ball, one net and one team—their own. No other team would be on the field and now, even the spectators would have to stand outside. It is obvious that Ethiopia has become one of the most repressive regimes in Africa; however, beyond that, it may be the most egregious example of an ethnic-apartheid regime on the continent—possibly worse than South Africa.*

The four ethnic-based parties that make up the EPRDF fail to represent the over eighty or more ethnic groups in the country; yet, *even those in three of the four parties are puppets of the one controlling group of the Tigrayan Peoples Democratic Front (TPLF)*. Going even further, the TPLF does not represent many of their own people who object to its actions. It is a system built on patronage. *In order to gain and maintain power, the TPLF has built an entrenched system of gifting regime loyalists from every ethnicity; but especially endowing its own region with perks as a means of entrapping them and making them complicit in supporting the regime. However, only those with connections to the Tigrayan Central Committee are assured the benefits. These are the people who dominate all key positions throughout every sector of society and who have greatly profited from this association. If the TPLF loses the election, this power group fears losing everything they have gained through years of brazenly seizing the power and assets of the country with impunity.*

Words like *democracy*, *elections*, and the *rule of law* are used to cloak the truth. Actions in the light are only meant for public display while what happens in the shadows undermines all else. *For example, the TPLF/EPRDF is a regime that espouses the values of a robust civil society; yet, they passed a law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSO), which has totally silenced any independent civil society voices within Ethiopia. In their place, government-controlled institutions have taken the place of the previous ones, working in concert with the goals of the TPLF/EPRDF. For example, efforts to advance such things as women's empowerment, human rights, reconciliation, justice and electoral rights, have been criminalized if an organization receives more than 10% of their funds from foreign sources. Over 2,600 organizations closed as a result. Another example is an anti-terrorism law that has been used to silence political dissent. In the light, it pretends to be working to protect the people against terrorism, but in the dark it has resulted in the imprisonment or exile of human rights bloggers, journalists, political activists, religious leaders or any others who speak out.*

Now, there is a national election scheduled that is merely for show. Wendy Sherman, the U.S. State Department Undersecretary, is the only one calling it a free, fair and credible election. She is the only one figuratively selling tickets to a political game where there are no seats left for anyone but the TPLF. All the groundwork has been laid months ago to ensure there is no competition.

As we described in a February 2015 press release <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/150116-Ethiopians-Boycott-Fake-Election.pdf> by the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE), the TPLF/EPRDF has taken many steps to make sure there are no viable opposition groups running against them. *Instead, they have manipulated the process all along the way so as to deny any entry. This has included intimidating and arresting political leaders and hijacking at least one organization from its leadership—Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ)—by replacing the legitimate leaders with their own regime cadres. Now they, under the guise of UDJ, will compete against themselves so they can win either way. Yet, even though they have successfully closed off all political space, they still are afraid of the people.*

Now they are sending their agents door-to-door to urge people to cast their ballots right there, warning them that now that they have voted, the TPLF/EPRDF knows who they are and how they voted. Many will be afraid to cast their vote for any other than the TPLF/EPRDF candidates. Those who resist are threatened.

When one tiny section of a political party, like the TPLF, holds complete power over the marketplace of opportunities as well as over the institutions capable of punishing those who fail to yield to its authority, you get a country like today's Ethiopia and an election like the one coming up this month. *Just wait until the TPLF manipulates the political scenery by removing Hailemariam Desalegn, the current prime minister who comes from the south—not from the Tigray region like others in the TPLF—and replaces him with one of their own TPLF cronies. How long can such a regime last when it excludes the vast majority of Ethiopians by ethnicity and corruption? The answer to this question is “not long” for it is unsustainable. It is out of desperation that this new pre-election vote is being forced on the people of Ethiopia.*

Interestingly, the recent tragedies affecting Ethiopians abroad have taken on a life of their own, uniting the people around their deep compassion for the many nameless Ethiopians whose ethnicity, religion, and background no longer seem to matter. *Diverse Ethiopians have been greatly affected by the death or hardship of these fellow Ethiopians—who were shot or beheaded in Libya for their Christian faith, who were burned alive in South Africa, whose organs were removed in the Sinai Desert, who are unwanted in countries among a flood of other refugees, who have been raped, abused or kept in domestic servitude in the Middle East until some even hung themselves or jumped off a bridge or balcony, or who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as they posed as Eritreans because so many international authorities discount the totalitarian nature of the TPLF/EPRDF. They left seeking freedom, safety from arrest or abuse, or a better life outside of Ethiopia. Ethiopians grieve for them and their loved ones regardless of their differences.*

We are witnessing a change before our eyes. Ethiopians are **putting humanity before ethnicity**, one of the foundational principles of the SMNE, as never before and it is a threat to the TPLF/EPRDF. When Ethiopians came out to mourn for those who died it turned into a protest against a system that drives so many of our young people from their homeland.

In fact, during the protest some of the younger people, born under the rule of the TPLF/EPRDF, were calling for former Ethiopian President Mengistu Hailemariam, a known brutal dictator, to come back to rule the country; choosing him over the current brutal and corrupt ethnic-apartheid system. Their position was based on the belief that people were more unified under Mengistu and that there had been more equal opportunity regardless of ethnicity. No wonder the TPLF/EPRDF fears what might happen if people came out to vote.

In conclusion, is this the democratic process that Wendy Sherman alluded to a few weeks ago that keeps getting better and better? Is this what a credible election is to the Obama administration? Obama was not elected in this way. If the State Department speaks the language of democracy building, should they not be outraged by what is happening in Ethiopia? Why is such a double-standard tolerated? Why is no one condemning it? Where are the other donor countries who are the financiers of this regime? Where is their voice? They cannot claim they do not know. We are attaching the voting cards that have been handed over to the people so others can see further evidence of what is happening on the ground. Now, the US, the UK, the EU and others cannot claim they did not know.

We are calling on donor countries to make the TPLF/EPRDF accountable. If donor countries can condemn a corrupt, rigged election process in countries where we have no alliances; but then overlook it in places like Ethiopia where we have national interests, is it not morally wrong? For Ethiopians, it is not only about our own national interests, but it is about the survival of our people and about our future.

The greatest responsibility for change in Ethiopia lies on the shoulders of the people of Ethiopia. For us, whether or not the outsider comes to our aid, we cannot determine, but with God's help and in keeping with His sovereign will, we Ethiopians will free ourselves. *We are not begging for our freedom to be handed over like foreign aid. Ethiopians will claim it for themselves. What we are asking is for outsiders not to be a roadblock to our freedom or to our future and to speak out truthfully when harm and immoral actions are committed.*

The SMNE was created for the freedom, justice, and overall wellbeing of the Ethiopian people, but even if there was opportunity for a change of government or leadership, it would not be enough. During the domination by the TPLF/EPRDF, the people of Ethiopia have been encouraged towards division, hate, violence and self-interest. Without change in the hearts and minds of the people of Ethiopia, we will be stuck in a self-defeating pattern. If we are to become a healthy, well-functioning society of diverse people, we must put **humanity before ethnicity** and care about the freedom, justice and well being of others like we care about our own for **no one is free until all are free**. This goes beyond our borders to our neighbors close and far in this global society.

Right now, the TPLF/EPRDF is not free. They are consumed with their personal survival and it is becoming increasingly more difficult for them to live in their self-made prison. *We must find a way as a society to re-engage as people. The apparatus of the TPLF/EPRDF political collective includes millions of regime collaborators who have chosen to buy into the system rather than to stand up against it; however, that loyalty is not deep, but can quickly change. Right now, only a few are thriving while the majority struggles to survive.*

Let us strive to be people who will not collaborate with what is to the detriment of others. Let us not take advantage of our own people, but instead, let us help contribute to the creation of a government of the people, by the people and for the well being of all the people. May God give courage to Ethiopians to stand up for what is right, good, and wise for our future together.

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