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A CALL TO THE PEOPLE OF ETHIOPIA: WHAT WILL WE LEAVE TO THE NEXT GENERATION— A GIFT OR A CURSE?

What will we leave to the next generation—a gift or a curse? This question is critically important; however, it is equally important to know whether or not our—or someone else's—individual or collective efforts, will produce the desired outcome.

These are key questions to ask ourselves today as we face the many warning signs that signal the growing instability in Ethiopia. Change appears to be inevitable, but what kind of change do we want and how can we get there? How can we avoid the mistakes of the past where mass efforts and sacrifice were hijacked by a minority at the top, greedy for power and profit?

The popular discontent leading to the overthrow of Haile Selassie did not lead to better lives for the vast majority of the people under the Derg government of Mengistu Hailemariam. Neither did the same unity of discontent under the Derg lead to improved lives for most Ethiopians under the TPLF/EPRDF. **In fact, some might agree that the situation became successively worse with each replacement, with the dreams for the future, becoming a casualty along the way and a curse to the next generation. This is what we have inherited.**

This was not the intention of many of those brilliant Ethiopian who gave their lives for efforts to bring greater freedom and rights to Ethiopia. One example of this were members of the student movement, in the early seventies, who resisted the Monarchy, hoping for something better. Most of those involved were the children of the elite who had had an opportunity to be educated; however, they wanted something better for others, including the peasants. One of their slogans was: “Land to the tillers,” because the land of the peasants had been taken away and they saw it as wrong.

They never thought it would end like it did; nor did they foresee the deep ethnic divisions we have today. Back then, ethnicity was not as much of a divisive factor as it is now. In fact, the student movement was made up of people of different ethnicities and religions; women were in positions of leadership; and together, they stood as one Ethiopian people for one united Ethiopia. Some of those involved have not given up their vision for a better, more just Ethiopia. They want to be part of that change they hoped for years ago; yet, we all are more aware of how easily our dreams can slip away. We must take precautions on this journey of today so it does not happen again. We thank all those from the past who tried, many of whom lost their lives, as well as those who continue the struggle. We need each other.

Today, we hear the call for unity from every direction; but, even unity, if it is blind unity, can take us in the wrong direction. Then we will end up in the same place as before. To avoid that, let us start by first asking:

“What Kind of Unity Do We NOT Want?”

- Do we want unity without truth?
- Do we want unity without principle or moral integrity?
- Do we want unity that advances someone's or some group's personal ambition for power, material gain or control that undermines the future well being of others?
- Do we want fake unity without commitment to the common good of all, when it can be used to hijack the outcome to serve the self-interest of a few?

Unity will require some compromises, but unity that compromises truth, moral integrity, or depends only on one leader, rather than the structural integration of principles into all aspects of change, will ultimately fail.

With this in mind, as we witness the rising tensions against the TPLF/EPRDF, we should be prepared should their control end quickly. We can see the increased fragility of the coalition government of the EPRDF, especially as the TPLF fumbles in its attempt to maintain its hegemony in the face of increasing protests and signs of resistance from people like Bereket Simon and Abadula Gemeda, the Speaker of the House of Parliament. If the EPRDF implodes, the current system of the TPLF will be challenged at its roots. **If it falls, what will replace it? The future is unpredictable and all of us know it. Let us look at some foundational challenges so we may consider, discuss and debate how we might better flourish in the future as one nation rather than self-destruct as people divided by ethnicity, religion and other differences.**

Worldview Under Pressure

How can we break the cycle of “bad endings” to our effort to bring change to Ethiopia?

Positive change will only come from a positive change of worldview— to something better, healthier, or more timely than we now have, if we are to build a better future.

Our view of the world may now be shaped by:

- Tribal affiliations and loyalties
- Fear and past trauma
- Cycles of violence and revenge
- Reaction-driven decisions
- Self-seeking and opportunism—whether individual or collective
- Years of oppression and injustice
- Unresolved grievances
- Pent-up anger
- Woundedness
- False assumptions and lies about the “other”

Each of these, singularly or cumulatively, result in a lack of trust towards the majority of others, making it extremely difficult to form a common vision and to work together in carrying it out.

How Can Ethiopia Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy?

One of the greatest challenges before Ethiopians is how to transition from the ethnic-based, authoritarian model of the TPLF/EPRDF, where favoritism and cronyism is entrenched in all institutions of government and civil society, to a model that ensures rights, dignity and opportunity to all the people of Ethiopia.

Examine yourself. Is this what you really want? Do we really want all others to enjoy freedom, justice, opportunity and well being as we enjoy them ourselves?

Do we genuinely want a new model based on representative democracy that is decentralized and where humanity comes before ethnicity or any other differences?

If so, or if others have ideas to present, how do we follow a process that will encourage the development of an agreed upon “ending plan” through a shared effort?

Inclusive values and principles should undergird the effort; however, unless the people of Ethiopia can agree on the principles, values and structures necessary to implement these key ingredients, there will be major obstacles to any effort to reform our nation.

Key Obstacle to Success: Lack of Trust

We must answer the following questions:

- How can we move ahead to form a common vision without trust?
- How can we develop relationship with others where trust can be built?
- How can we do that by talking to each other instead of talking about each other?
- When no or little trust exists, how can we build greater trust artificially by integrating it into the structure of the governance system? Because all of us can be self-centered and flawed; we must have a means to ensure compliance to just laws and practices.
- How can we build safety measures into a transition plan, knowing some will want to hijack it? A shared effort to the wrong end plan, whether open or hidden, should not be pursued and confronted.
- How can we create a strong transitional plan, including an impartial justice system, to undergird the move from the current tribal model of the TPLF/EPRDF to a free, just and decentralized nation based on representative democracy?

Another Obstacle: Lack of Truth

Truth has been a threat to the TPLF from the beginning. **The foundation of the TPLF vision was to liberate themselves from Ethiopia, but when they succeeded, also with the help of others, they reclaimed the country and its resources for their own advancement. Now angry, revenge-filled and unhealed victims; they identified with their former oppressors and became the next perpetrators and opportunists, using the justification that it was now “their turn to rule, eat and rob.” However, because they still knew it was wrong, it had to be hidden.**

As a result, a “fake” front for the TPLF— the EPRDF Party— was necessary so as to appear as the legitimate democratic replacement to the Derg. Unfortunately, this opportunity to be “better” than the previous system was exploited to advance the TPLF and its cronies. This included inciting division along the lines of ethnicity, religion, political viewpoint, boundary lines and whatever worked to perpetuate their rule.

Ironically, the ideology (worldview) they fought against so as to liberate themselves, they later adopted as their own, causing a growing backlash today. Because it is wrong and they know it; truth becomes the enemy. The truth can also convict one’s conscience and as we know human nature; it is hard to face it. Thus the worse one feels, the more some will try to suppress the truth. Yet, what will liberate them and us from the predicament of today is the truth.

If the TPLF/EPRDF were willing to face it, with forgiveness, the TPLF/EPRDF could become part of our mutual recovery, the reconciliation of our people and the restoration of our land. **It would take moral courage, but it could be powerful and without precedent! No one expects them to do it; but who knows, people can be healed and changed!**

What Kind of Worldview Helps Us Become Our Neighbors’ Keeper— Neighbors Both Near and Far?

We must discard the lies, negative ideas and self-serving individual or collective agendas that many of us carry— either knowingly or unknowingly—that block us from achieving a better Ethiopia. **This includes such things as acknowledging the humanity, value and rights of people from other ethnic groups and backgrounds.**

Moral and God-fearing people need fewer laws and less enforcement. Religious leaders, elders, communities and families, all have an important role to play in advancing the moral and spiritual beliefs and actions of the present and future generations. Do they conform to our beliefs or does our ethnic loyalties or greed hijack our beliefs? What comes first?

Yet, if some maintain a solitary struggle for freedom without regard to other groups, others should still pursue the common good and rights for all, including them. At the present time, many do not join others because there is so little trust that the ending benefits will be mutually shared. Fear, expectations of loyalty, penalties for non-traditional views and ambition can deter some from adopting an inclusive goal for all Ethiopians.

Common vision cannot be to simply end the TPLF/EPRDF without an end plan for the increased wellbeing of all. The end plan is critically important to the success of this effort. The common vision at the front end, will not be enough. **The most critical question is: what must we do individually and collectively to achieve the best end goal for all Ethiopians?**

What one believes, whether good or bad, right or wrong, true or false, will be determined by our worldview, values, beliefs and principles. All these will shape the outcome. We must be careful and should start by rebuilding ethics-based models for leadership within our government, institutions, civil society and social structures. This may require education and training. We also must think how we can resolve past grievances so we can move ahead, perhaps looking at models used in other countries.

Reconciliation Must Be Genuine to Work

Faith leaders and others can play a role in encouraging reconciliation and the restoration of justice; however, it must be genuine. The TPLF/EPRDF is increasingly talking about reconciliation. Wherever there is sincerity, we welcome this new direction, but our responsibility is to hold them, as well as ourselves and others, accountable for genuine corrective action where there is real repentance and forgiveness. The status quo is unsustainable.

Some of the meaningful actions that will prove it is real, not an effort to merely manipulate the public, will be to speak the truth, to cease human rights abuses, to release all political prisoners, to stop all torture, to restore justice to the courts, to rescind the CSO law and rewrite the anti-terrorism laws so as not to use it to target our finest voices of truth and freedom.

Truth is in short supply and a superficial effort to bring reconciliation that is simply meant to pacify the people without any meaningful reforms, will not suffice. It is fake; yet, if there is sincerity, let us start the dialogue! One example was done in Dallas last weekend, October 7-9, when more than 25 civic organizations came together and formed a consortium called: **Tibebir**. This is an excellent step forward and we applaud the effort.

For the Sake of Our Children

In summary, as we look at our opening question today, focused on what we will pass on to the next generation, a gift or a curse, we may discover something we hold in common—the Ethiopia we will pass on to our own children and grandchildren.

Humanize them, starting first with those in your own families. Name each of them. Ask yourself what life will be like them if we forget the effect our decision today will have on their future? It is an opportunity to do it right so they can have better lives.

As for me, Obang Metho and the SMNE leaders, we want to contribute to their future by choosing well today. Humanity before ethnicity is essential and the only way forward. It will mean greater opportunity, prosperity, rights and dignity for all of our children and grandchildren. If your children or your ethnic group are not free, sustainable peace will never come to any of them for no one is free until all are free. Let us care for each other for the sake of all our children.

May God give us guidance to avoid anything that will lead us to our mutual destruction.

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