



February 13, 2018

A LETTER FROM MR. OBANG METHO TO THE OPDO AND TO THE PEOPLE OF ETHIOPIA IN RESPONSE TO THE RECENT STATEMENT BY THE OPDO: IS THERE AN OPEN DOOR FOR TPLF/EPRDF TO RECONCILE WITH THE PEOPLE OF ETHIOPIA? DEFINITELY: IT'S NOT TOO LATE!

Dear OPDO Central Committee and people of Ethiopia:

I am writing this letter to you on behalf of the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)**, a non-violent, non-political, grassroots social justice movement of diverse Ethiopians, formed in 2008 to advance truth, justice, freedom, equality, reconciliation, accountability and respect for the human rights of all Ethiopians; motivated by the truth: **“no one will be free until all are free.”** We have been working to mobilize Ethiopians in the Diaspora and within Ethiopia to unite in a coalition across ethnic, regional, political, cultural, gender and religious lines to build a society where **“humanity comes before ethnicity”** or any other differences.

Our work has included international human rights advocacy, raising awareness, refugee advocacy, investigation and analysis, reconciliation work, networking and coalition building. Our goal is to be a catalyst in bringing about a “New Ethiopia” where robust freedoms, the rule of law, transparency, respect for human rights, equal opportunity and good governance are grounded on the God-given dignity and worth of every human being.

Because we love Ethiopia and care deeply about the security and well being of all of its people, as well as in maintaining its national integrity at this dangerous time in its history, we want to affirm the positive direction laid out in the recent OPDO statement and to encourage those involved, as well as others, to continue this noble work towards a better, more inclusive, more democratic, more just and more peaceful home for all the people of Ethiopia— including the TPLF/EPRDF.

OPDO’S STATEMENT TO OROMIA, ALL ETHIOPIANS AND THE DIASPORA, CALLING US TO ALL WORK TOGETHER, HAS SHAKEN THE TPLF

This past week, the leadership of the OPDO, headed up by Lemma Mergesa, issued a written statement addressed not only to the people of Oromia, the region the OPDO represents; but **it also included a call to all the people of Ethiopia, inviting them to work together in a people-to-people process to find a way to solve the current daunting crisis.** The statement followed an eight-day meeting of the OPDO that focused on the deepening resistance of the Oromo and others to the TPLF-dominated ruling regime, as well as on the schism within the EPRDF itself. The statement was extraordinary and has already begun to shake up the ethnic-based foundation of the TPLF. Keep in mind, the TPLF, and its profoundly broken system, is different from the people of Tigray, who are also included in this call to join together.

We Ethiopians should be aware of repeated attempts by the TPLF to incite division as a means to destroy efforts to form a common, principle-based vision, for the good of all Ethiopians. Will the TPLF attempt to divide Oromo from within and Oromo from others? Definitely! Will the same tactic be used among other groups? Definitely! The lifeline of this ethnic minority, crony-based party, which has dominated Ethiopia for 27 years, has depended on the vulnerability of Ethiopians to willingly divide among themselves, especially along ethnic lines. As more Ethiopians gain understanding of how easily we may have been manipulated in the past; let us refuse to fall into this trap once again. We can love our own families, communities and ethnicities while still caring about others. This is our challenge today!

THE TPLF/EPRDF HAS NEVER DIRECTLY COMMUNICATED LIKE THIS WITH THE PEOPLE OF ETHIOPIA

The statement made by the OPDO was the first such communication from any branch of the TPLF/EPRDF government body to be addressed directly to all of the people of Ethiopia.

Can anyone recall former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the TPLF or the EPRDF ever initiating such communication? Did they ever seek to engage the people in finding solutions to problems? **Instead, the people of Ethiopia were only acknowledged as collective ethnic groups, usually led by TPLF surrogates as reporters and representatives. Based on the needs of the TPLF, these non-TPLF groups would be valued or devalued, heard or ignored, and promoted or eliminated based on such factors as ethnicity, party membership or some other sign of either allegiance or opposition to the TPLF/EPRDF.**

Because the focus was only on groups, they could be collectively pitted against each other as a means to more effectively disempower them, while helping to sustain the TPLF. The topic of peoples' rights as citizens of the country was actively avoided. **Individuals were only useful if they were leaders of competing groups, or even of the same group, who could knowingly or unknowingly, divert the focus from a broader struggle based on a common, principle-based vision to something smaller and weaker; and in doing so, represent the interests of the TPLF/EPRDF in disempowering any resistance.**

AN INCLUSIVE CALL TO ALL, INCLUDING OPPOSITION MEMBERS AND THE DIASPORA

The second point of great encouragement in the statement was the inclusive call by the OPDO leadership to others outside of their immediate jurisdiction to work together. This is unprecedented. The statement not only addressed people within the Oromia region; **it went beyond to call all Ethiopians to work together to find a solution to our present crisis. When in the past has the government ever issued such a call?**

Members of opposition parties and Ethiopians in the Diaspora were specifically included in this call; which is another huge difference from the past actions of the TPLF/EPRDF where opposition members were never acknowledged except when accused of being anti-government, anti-development, or as terrorists. These are key points in the OPDO approach that indicate a deeper understanding of the importance of reaching out to others, including those outside our own groups, so as to achieve a bigger, more sustainable change.

Now, **we should be vigilant and “start watching” for TPLF efforts to create division around this point, but it no longer may be so easy for the TPLF to divide us.** The OPDO and other like-minded people and groups have become *“the grownups in the room of the TPLF/EPRDF”* who can see through TPLF manipulations to separate the Oromo from others; and if that does not work, to create division among the Oromos on this point. It may be too late for these old TPLF tricks to succeed. Keep watching because the TPLF just may not get what they want.

INVITATION TO ENGAGE TOGETHER IN PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE DIALOGUE(S)

A third point in this statement to highlight is the call for something quite threatening to the TPLF/EPRDF — **a people-to-people dialogue.** Such a dialogue could enable people to meet to speak, to listen and to work together on a relational level to find solutions to the conflicts and problems before us. The OPDO has given an open invitation to all Ethiopian people to engage in a people-to-people dialogue that can lead to strengthening shared values and developing a common vision. When have the people in the past ever even been consulted based on being citizens of the same country?

For the TPLF/EPRDF, shared values and a common vision would mean the possibility of cohesion and cooperation that might undermine the TPLF/EPRDF hold on power— the opposite approach being preferred— to divide and conquer. Actually, such a coalition could be the best outcome for the TPLF as it could help avert a violent crisis and aide the development of a principle-based foundation for change in Ethiopia that would also include them. Until more recently, the current TPLF/EPRDF organizational model of **“nations and nationalities”** has been fundamental to their sustainability. For example, naming the regions by ethnicity has had many negative side effects, including the marginalization and silencing of most ethnicities, except for the four ethnic-based groups that make up the EPRDF.

Similarly, even the Ethiopian Constitution breaks Ethiopians up into many subgroups. Instead of “we the people” like in the American Constitution and many other countries, inferring a country where people share a common vision, the Ethiopian Constitution refers to **“nations and nationalities,” with differing national interests—sometimes even secession. By default, this sets up a system that does not work for any of the disempowered “nations” when one or a few control all the rest. It gives reason for the chaos we are facing today.**

Getachew Reda, the former spokesperson for the government, made an obvious attempt to hijack the improving cooperation between the Amhara and Oromo in 2016 when some Amhara and Oromo claimed they were one people and said that each had the others’ blood running through their veins. Ato Getachew’s response on public TV was a fear-based attempt to incite division once again. **He said that mixing Oromo and Amhara together was like a flame of fire in hay that would ignite. He obviously knew that such cooperation and connectedness was the greatest threat to sustaining TPLF power. Sadly, the “lifeblood” of their whole system is to separate the people instead of building a democracy based on shared values and holding to a common, inclusive vision. No wonder everyone is supposed to have an ID with his or her ethnicity on it.**

Our history under the TPLF/EPRDF has been one-sided, top-down, self-centered decision-making, with little consideration, understanding or accountability to others, an especially destructive and undemocratic process.

CALLING AUTHORITARIAN RULE, “BABY STEPS TO DEMOCRACY,” IS REALLY DEMOCRACY DENIED INSTEAD OF PRIORITIZED

The fourth notable point in the recent statement is **the importance placed on establishing a democratic foundation in Ethiopia as a core priority.** For years, the TPLF/EPRDF justified its increasingly authoritarian rule as necessary for a “people not ready for democracy,” meaning Ethiopians. Instead, they prioritized a form of economic development that nearly exclusively favored themselves, their cronies, and some in their ethnic group and left all others out.

Worse yet, were the harsh practices utilized to make it work for a few at a high cost to others. This meant: human rights abuses, repression of basic civil rights, the imprisonment of tens of thousands of political prisoners, widespread injustices, control of information and the media, land grabs, resource exploitation, corrupt practices, money laundering and the suppression of civil society. **If anyone objected to the shortcomings to the vast numbers of Ethiopians who were left out of this model of development, they were considered anti-government, anti-development, anti-peace, anti-stability and an enemy of the state, sometimes leading to imprisonment. In the statement by the OPDO, democratic practice and integration into the social, cultural and economic fabric of the country has been made a priority.**

The irony is that economic development can be stronger, more sustainable and more inclusive in countries where robust freedoms are strong and inclusive. When people are not free, it is much easier to exploit the resources of the country, creating wealth mainly for power holders and their cronies while the people are left out, making it less stable and less sustainable like is the case now in Ethiopia. There are other examples that have not ended well, like Libya and Iraq; as well as many ongoing examples, like the Congo, Yemen, Somalia and South Sudan.

OBSERVATIONS:

All these points in this statement are long overdue. This is what is expected from real leaders and institutions when the goals are based on shared values and inclusiveness. Now it is important to implement it in the right way; however, it will not be easy under the current conditions.

For starters, the *Charities and Societies Proclamation law (CSO)* undermines and obstructs these goals from being achieved. Therefore, it is essential that it be rescinded along with others, like the **Anti-Terrorism law** that has been used to falsely charge and silence democratic voices. **Laws restricting the media and the free flow of information must also struck down. How can work be accomplished while these laws and restrictions stand?**

Secondly, political prisoners, opposition party leaders, religious leaders and others being unjustly held, must be released in every region of the country. The unexpected release of seven high profile opposition party leaders namely Bekele Gerba, Gurmesa Ayano, Addisu Bulala and Dejene Tafa and other members from the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) is great steps. We would not be surprised if he, Merera Gudina and others now joined together to call for the release of all other political prisoners, like Eskinder Nega, Andualem Arage, Abebe Kesto and so many more —without conditions.

This would lay the groundwork for the next steps, which include the development of a cooperative and strategic plan that lays the foundation for bringing people together for dialogue, reconciliation and the integration of democratic principles within all sectors of society. Such plans should have local, regional, federal, and international levels (Diaspora) of participation and implementation.

Lastly, a huge remaining issue in the OPDO's statement is the wrongful use of violence by security forces. **In the last few years, thousands of people have been killed, many more injured and tens of thousands put in jails and detention centers.** The statement did not mention this, but we expect it will be addressed, particularly in light of the ongoing violence and killing of more Ethiopians as recently as this past week. Those killed had been displaced by violence in the southern Oromia region. It is believed the perpetrators were TPLF Agazi security forces. We condemn the use of violence and these killings. Our deepest sympathy goes out to the families who lost their loved ones.

The core responsibility of any government is the security and wellbeing of all their citizens; yet, it is TPLF forces doing the killing of unarmed civilians in desperate circumstances. Those doing the killing should be held accountable. The safety, security and peace among the people is a paramount issue that should be immediately addressed in every region.

SUMMARY:

These are only a few of the things, among many others, we affirm in this statement and **we greatly appreciate the leaders of the OPDO and especially Obo Lemma Megeressa, Dr. Abiy Ahmed and the OPDO Central Committee for its content, tone and inclusive call. What you have done shows the kind of leadership we need for a better future. We affirm other leaders, including those recently released from prisons and those still being held, as well as others still to emerge, who can help lead all the people of Ethiopia to a better shared future.**

It is very encouraging, and if continued and supported, it may open a window of opportunity for change and an open door to the TPLF/EPRDF to come to the table. We hope it will lead to real results, such as the release of all the remaining political prisoners throughout every region of the country.

We also hope it will lead to local, regional and national dialogue(s) that will pave the way to meaningful reforms, correction of rampant injustices, the democratization of our government, the strengthening of non-government institutions, the resolution of conflicts and grievances, and to healing, reconciliation and peace among our people.

SMNE CORE VALUES AND PRINCIPLES FOR AN INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY

The reason we are saying this is because it reflects our core values that led us to enlarge our vision from the ethnic-based model of the *Anual Justice Council (AJC)* to the inclusive model of the *Solidarity Movement of a New Ethiopia (SMNE)* after realizing that **as part of a larger nation where injustice was systemic, justice would not come to one group until it came to all— no one is free until all are free. This is practical, but God also calls us to care about our neighbors.**

We also learned that the challenge in Ethiopia was not simply changing the regime, but transforming the flawed system— and the ideology that supported it— that threatened to continuously recycle the same problems, only with different leadership. **This led us to think the problem we faced was the failure to value the humanity of others outside our own groups— to put humanity before ethnicity or any other identify factors. Why? The reason is basic, because human rights are for human beings, all of whom were all created equal. It is God who gives each and every one of us value and dignity.**

These principles led us to establish the SMNE nearly ten years ago. From then until today, **we have been promoting these principles and reaching out to all Ethiopians, every one of which is a stakeholder. This includes members of the TPLF/EPRDF. The goal is to bring justice and freedom to all citizens through an agreed-upon process, which will not trigger violence, killing and destruction. The statements made by the OPDO and actions taken thus far give us a promising example of what we believe will bring a win-win resolution and lasting change.**

We do not have assurance that the TPLF/EPRDF will come forward. Although the current crisis has deepened to a low unseen in the past; yet, some may refuse to come to the table. In the past, offers have gone without response. **We in the SMNE have called out to various TPLF/EPRDF government officials, political groups and sectors within Ethiopia for change, often in response to human rights violations and other injustices, but also because of the inevitability of the crisis of today, which has been building for years.**

Here are some examples:

In the last ten years, we have reached out to former PM Meles Zenawi; not once, but twice, with no response. We wrote a public letter to current Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, calling on him to make changes following the death of Meles, with no response. We have reached out to the TPLF Central Committee with the same result. We reach out again today and hope they will finally listen. We want them to be part of this country in the future, especially the Tigrayans they claim to represent. We are brothers and sisters; and together, with God's help, we can find a better way out of this crisis.

We affirm our support of this OPDO statement and of what the OPDO is doing. It is the reason we are sending this letter. The problem of Ethiopia can only be solved by Ethiopians, themselves, by talking to each other rather than about each other and by acknowledging we share a common vision. We do not only share land; we share blood and have more in common than not.

The building blocks of the New Ethiopia, which the OPDO also acknowledge, are based on shared values. The dialogue has to start about these shared values so that once people start talking to each other, trust will be built and once there is trust, people can start working together to build a better Ethiopia, not only for one ethnic group or a few elite, but for everyone.

May God help us!

In hope and trust,
Your brother,

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