



April 20, 2018

**TO ALL ETHIOPIANS SEEKING JUSTICE AND GOOD GOVERNANCE:
IMPORTANT ALERT: NATION BUILDING IN ETHIOPIA WILL NOT BE
ACCOMPLISHED IN A FEW WEEKS! LET'S PITCH IN AND HELP!**

Nation building is a complex process that will take time; especially in a country like Ethiopia that has not been free for decades and where our history reveals innumerable power struggles among us, which have repeatedly hijacked the hopes of the people for freedom and justice. It has infected us with a high level of suspicion towards others. This lack of trust dominates the current political climate, which may trigger increased sensitivities and emotional overreactions to what would otherwise be minor or even positive. This tendency is multiplied when it involves those outside one's own "group," whatever that might be.

Into this environment, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has emerged. What are our expectations of him? Are they reasonable? Are they based on the reality on the ground? When critical, is a judgment based on important core issues or on more disputable issues where opinions may vary? How quickly should changes be made? Where do conflicts of interest or bias based on ethnicity, political views, regional interests or personal ambitions shade the opinions? How can we support change for all in a country steeped in zero-sum politics, where the success of someone else or some other ethnic group is viewed as a threat to one's own objectives, resulting in the desire to see it all fail? Is change immediate or a process; and again, what is realistic and how can each of us pitch in and help?

It has been just over three weeks since the newly appointed prime minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, gave his inspiring speech before the Ethiopian Parliament and to the people of Ethiopia regarding his new vision for Ethiopia. The response was overwhelmingly positive. He said things in that speech that gave us a glimmer of hope.

Since that time, PM Abiy has reached out to many throughout the country, he visited Jijiga (Ethio-Somali), Ambo (Ormia region), Mekelle (Tigray region) and Gondar (Amhara region), with the intention of continuing to connect with people in every region as well as with groups such as the youth who have protested for change and opposition figures who were invited to the palace and encouraged to share ideas. He has also invited members of the opposition and civic society to dinner at the National Palace, met up with youth and business owners, he met with religious leaders in Bahir Dar, extended a hand to those in the Diaspora in an effort to draw on their ideas and expertise.

Here are a few of these specific actions in more detail:

- PM Abiy, along with OPDO president, Lemma Megersa, Deputy Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Demeke Mekonnen and as well as some elders and others, traveled to the Ethio-Somali region to meet with their government authorities, elders and other leaders in an effort to find solutions to the recent violent conflicts between Ethiopian Somalis and the Oromo that have led to the displacement of nearly a million people.



- He held and invited members of the opposition and civil society to come together. He shared his vision for Ethiopia and invited their participation in the future of the country, including their ideas to bring reforms to the present system. He affirmed the need for greater political space, an inclusive national dialogue and resulting reforms, which could result in a more open electoral system, giving the opportunity for opposition members to become political competitors due to opening up the present closed political space.
- PM Abiy met with up with more the 30,000 in Ambo, Oromia, where many protests were carried out and with 25,000 youth and others in Addis Ababa. He affirmed their aspirations for justice, freedom and opportunity and gave credit to those in the youth movement, among others, for pressuring the status quo, creating this new opening for change.



- A public meeting was held in Mekelle where he assured the people of Tigray that they were part of Ethiopia and Ethiopia was part of them, and that all people should work together to build a country for everyone.



- He went to the Amhara region to meet with their people and leaders to establish a relationship that will help them work together for the good of all people.



- He went to Bahir Dar and talked with religious leaders especially Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church, where the visionary, charismatic and fearless spiritual leader Abune Abraham addressed the public with the words of truth when he said: “The church is under attack and it is suffering and losing its identity as a moral driven and quality religious institution today. It has been abused, hurt by the authorities at different times and it must return to her respected merit and dignity because it is impossible to build a country without free religious institutions”. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed replied to Abune Abraham by saying that “we need our religious leaders to help us with prayers and to help us do our work to build unity in Ethiopia”

- Prime Minister Abiy is continuing on a national tour to all regions of the country in order to meet with the people and officials so as to better listen and connect with issues on the ground.

We are encouraged with the actions of these past weeks, for PM Abiy speaks the vision most of us have been struggling for over the last years; but yet, he is already being criticized for not doing enough, soon enough, or for saying or doing something that someone else finds objectionable.

Right now, PM Abiy is part of the EPRDF party, **NOT the TPLF**, but it is the people's (Qeero and Fano) struggle that brought him to where he is today and he knows it. *It is the people who can continue to pressure for reforms, even enabling and empowering him to accomplish what we want. Remember, he is human and so are we. None of us can be perfect and mistakes maybe made. We all should be held accountable. Additionally, the changes we seek are major, especially when they must be navigated among those who have had power and entitlements for decades. Some will resist change due to past privileges and others will resist change or success under any one else's name.*

These are expected problems; however, the status quo is no longer legitimate and *we, the people, must pitch in to maintain the movement forward lest we lose such a key advocate from within, such as PM Abiy. There are many forces that want him to fail. The easy way to make the efforts of PM Abiy fail is for him to be disempowered. This could result by focusing on those negative voices around us; some because of past disappointments, others because they want the status quo, and others because they seek to advance themselves by swaying and discouraging others to give up on him; and to instead, join in with them. If we all can work for increased political space, there will be room in the future for robust political competition through the electoral system.*

On the positive side, we are seeing a new and unexpected source of strength and pressure as we see the rise of bold reformists within the EPRDF. This is the first time in fifty years that a leader has come in a peaceful way— without the use of intimidation and force— to open up opportunities for democratic change for all the people of Ethiopia. Many of us underestimated the desire for democratic reforms from numerous leaders, government officials and parliamentarians within the EPRDF.

We can believe the same desire for change exists in many other unexpected places as well, like within the justice system, the military and beyond. Such infrastructural support from those within— if it continues— could make for genuine peaceful democratic reforms, without using the barrel of the gun to destroy each other and our infrastructure. This would be a first; yet, it is a fragile time.

Change will not be instant and if we are quick to attack, especially on minor or negotiable issues of process, message, timing or priorities, we may see this golden opportunity disappear. If we listen to those forces that would be happy for PM Abiy and this new Ethiopian vision to fail, we may again find our sacrifices, struggle and hopes crushed. Did we Ethiopians, both in the opposition and within the structure of the EPRDF, really avert an explosion of ethnic-based violence and destruction only to fall into it again?

Let us pitch in and help this transition to greater democratic reforms for all Ethiopians to succeed. Let us be slow to criticize on the minor points, but strong in holding all accountable to those core values of “putting humanity before ethnicity” or any other differences and to work for the freedom of all our people for “no one will be free until all are free.” Let these and other values create the foundation of the change we seek.

May God help us!

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