

April 22, 2012



## **EMERGENCY ALERT:**

### **An Open Letter to Ethiopian Muslims, Christians, Jews and all believers in freedom of religion, belief to stand together for the religious freedom.**

To the Muslim, I greet you in the name of God, the Compassionate and merciful:

To the Christians, I greet you in the name of God's son, Jesus Christ, Savior and Redeemer:

To the Jews, I greet you in the name of God Almighty, the Creator of all things:

To the believer in religious freedom, who believes in the right of every person to freedom of belief, opinion and thought:

**Dear Ethiopian, this message to you is extremely urgent! I am calling on Muslims, Christians, Jews and all believers in freedom of religion, belief, opinion and thought to stand together for the religious freedom of our Ethiopian Muslim sisters and brothers right now, but also for the religious freedom of all Ethiopians to worship and practice one's religion without government interference.**

As a follower of Jesus Christ and as the Executive Director of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia), a grassroots social justice movement for ALL the precious diverse people of Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and beyond, **we are called to defend the lives, rights and liberties of all members of our greater human family, regardless of what faith they do or do not practice. If we do not stand up for each other's religious freedom and other rights, we will all be harmed for no one is free unless all are free!**

**Caring about the rights of each other is the only way to build a New Ethiopia where one of the primary rights we must claim for all our people is the right to freedom of religion, belief, opinion and thought. No one should have to adopt a "certain" religion or be a member of "certain" tribe in order to gain the full rights that first come from being a human being, created by God with intrinsic worth, dignity and purpose. This is the meaning of putting humanity before ethnicity, religion, gender, socio-economic status, language, political affiliation or any other distinctions.**

It may be no surprise that the Meles regime is trying to control the religious leadership and practice of Ethiopian Muslims as well as to divide Ethiopian people of faith by religion in order to maintain their tyrannical control. We know that genuine faith is a threat to this regime that wants every institution and sector of Ethiopian society under their control. **We also know that Christians, Muslims and Jews have a long-standing history of living peacefully among each other. This harmony is a threat to the TPLF/EPRDF regime and to their longevity; however, less known to you may be the fact that Meles is attempting to fight terrorism publically while covertly trying to advance the radicalization of Ethiopian Muslims who have always practiced a moderate form of Islam. Once we know this, we Ethiopians can quickly grasp why: in order for Meles to divide Muslims and to further strengthen his role as a partner in the global war on terror.**

Ethiopian Muslims have recently contacted the SMNE due to their serious objection to the TPLF/EPRDF government's interference in their religious affairs. These objections include **the TPLF regime's appointment of their religious leaders to the Ethiopian Muslim Supreme Council, the attempt to restrict basic religious practices, the destruction of religious places, the harassment and dismissal of moderate Ethiopian Muslim scholars and leaders from places of influence, the closing or takeover of some theological schools and colleges and the attempt to forcibly indoctrinate Ethiopian Muslims with "Ahbash" and other extremist ideology originating from Lebanon and Syria, all against their will and belief.** Please click on the following link <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/amharic/120424-pm.pdf> to read their letter to Mr. Meles Zenawi in Amharic.

**We must resist and stand together to oppose the undermining of our faith, practice, religious institutions and heritage of tolerance and harmony towards each other.**

According to a letter <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/downloads/120424-Letter-to-State-Dept.pdf> submitted on November 4, 2011 to the U.S. State Department in reference to this, the Ethio/American Muslims Ad Hoc Committee say, *"We deplore all extremism, religious or political. Justice is the only course for peace."* They also assert, *"...Ethiopia belongs to all Ethiopians irrespective of their religious faith or ethnicity"* and ask the US State Department to pressure the Ethiopian government to: *"to be purely secular and be fair and just to all religious groups of Ethiopia without discrimination."*

In the last weeks, Ethiopian Muslims have been rallying.



Here are their three basic current demands:

1. **FREEDOM FROM TPLF/EPRDF INTERFERENCE IN THE ELECTION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP:** In Ethiopia, top leadership positions for the **Ethiopian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (Majlis)** have always been democratically elected by imams in mosques throughout Ethiopia, every three years. Six years ago, prior to the election, the TPLF/EPRDF interfered with that process and instead, without an election, appointed “government-friendly” leaders to the Supreme Council who then assumed the top positions of authority over mosques, imams and Muslims in the country. Three years later, in 2009, the regime extended the term of this leadership another three years, without an election. As these Majlis leaders have carried out the directives of the TPLF/EPRDF, they never go anywhere without their armed security guards, fearing the very people they are supposed to represent.

This hijacking of top religious leadership positions is no different from what the Meles regime has done to other religious groups as well as to every major institution in every sector of society. This includes their complete one-party apartheid control of all aspects of government, from the federal to the local levels. It is now time for another election and tensions are increasing as Muslims are no longer willing to remain silent. Ethiopian Muslims are now rising up to demand the freedom to choose their own leadership without government interference.

2. **FREEDOM FROM REGIME PRESSURE TO ADOPT EXTREMIST DOCTRINE FOREIGN TO THE MAJORITY OF ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS:** Those TPLF/EPRDF-appointed leaders to the **Ethiopian Muslim Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs** are seen as “**pseudo-Muslims**” who have used their ill-gotten authority to try to force moderate Ethiopian Muslims to adopt more extremist views of Islam. This imported belief system, Ahabash, is strongly opposed and condemned by most all Ethiopian Muslim scholars who see it as an attempt to “radicalize” and divide them. Those who oppose this “Ahabashanization” have faced punitive consequences. This includes arrests, detentions, harassment and dismissal from jobs. This is a serious violation of their religious freedom and a threat to them as people; particularly as the same regime that is pushing radicalization is then trying to use them to incite fear, suspicion and division on the part of other Ethiopians and others in the international community. The global fear of radical Islam is also being exploited in order to drum up support from the West.
3. **FREEDOM FROM REGIME’S ATTEMPT TO RADICALIZE THEOLOGICAL TEACHING AT RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS:** This entire protest began at Awolia College and School and was led by students who strongly objected to TPLF/EPRDF’s attempt to bring the school under this Ahabash ideology.<sup>1</sup> They also opposed the ongoing move towards bringing the school under the alleged auspices of the even more radical Islamic International Relief Organization (IIRO), a group based in Saudi Arabia that has advanced militancy around the world.

In resistance, the students formed the **Awolia Movement** to protest the forceful “Ahabashanization” of their school. Allegedly, this effort to “take-over” Awolia College and other schools has already included the dismissal of their moderate Muslim teachers, the imprisonment and abduction of moderate Muslim scholars and the closure of some mosques, colleges and schools. The Awolia Movement calls for respect for the right to freedom of belief, separation of state and religion and freedom of expression and association. With the exception of TPLF/EPRDF supporters, are not these demands what every Ethiopian seeks?

Dear Ethiopians, should we not join our Muslim brothers and sisters? They should not be alone in exposing to the world what this regime is doing to members of their faith. Also outrageous, we know Meles supporters have posed as Muslims in committing violence against Christians in the same way regime supporters have perpetrated crimes disguised as others in order to justify a counter insurgency.

What Meles most wants is for the rest of Ethiopians to remain isolated from others and to not see it as a threat to all of us! **DEAR ETHIOPIANS, DO NOT FALL INTO THIS TRAP OF ETHNIC and RELIGIOUS DIVISION, HATRED, ALIENATION AND ISOLATION! WE MUST STAND TOGETHER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR ALL! Meles' deliberate plan to incite or fabricate extremism at the expense of all of us should be contemptible to every decent human being!** Please click on the following link to read the TPLF secret document in Amharic that was leaked out to the SMNE. The document is a TPLF plan to incite the extremism in Ethiopia. <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/amharic/120424-leaked-confid-gov-doc.pdf>

I am personally asking for Ethiopians of every belief, but particularly Muslims, Christians and Jews, to resist efforts of this regime to divide us along religious lines. Will you show love to each other as human beings first and as full members of our Ethiopian family? Muslim and Christians make up almost our entire population of our nation. The background of both of our faiths, along with the Jews, comes from the line of Abraham; giving us a common origination of our belief in one God.

Even though we still have differences of belief, we Ethiopians have gotten along quite well until more recently when the TPLF/EPRDF has been using our religion to divide us; yet, if we can establish stronger bonds of peace and caring between us we can make this regime's efforts to divide us backfire to instead to make us more unified. As people of the Book, we are called to love God with all our heart, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. What a great gift this would be to our future descendants. God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Lo! God enjoineeth [commands] justice and kindness, and giving to kinsfolk, and forbiddeth lewdness and abomination and wickedness. He exhorteth you in order that ye may take heed (Al Nahl, 16:90).* Jesus Christ said: *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons [and daughters] of God,"* (Matthew 5:9), and also: *"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?"* (Matthew 16:26).

Fellow Ethiopians, you are even more than neighbors; you are part of the Ethiopian family and part of the human family. We not only share the land, but the blood that runs through our veins has been passed on to us by shared ancestors. Our safety and survival depends on each other and we need to be there for members of our family. This is something demonstrated by our Ethiopian ancestors before us and we should treasure this legacy.

We may have many negative images as Ethiopians but yet our ability, as diverse religious people, to live together with respect, tolerance and peace is a cause for celebration in this world where Ethiopia is one of the few countries who have achieved this. Muhammad told his followers many years ago to find safety in this great land of ours. That tolerance is visible by going to a Christian church and finding a follower of Jesus Christ by the name of Mohammed or going to a Muslim mosque and finding someone named Peter worshipping Allah. The brothers and sisters around them worship together without suspicion or fear. This also goes back to the reality that there are many mixed families in Ethiopia where the husbands are Christians and wives are Muslims or vice versa; yet, unlike in some places in the world, there is no fear within or between families.

This Ethiopian tradition of respecting the independence of religious beliefs is unique in the world and many outsiders do not know this. Now this religious freedom is being attacked by the TPLF as they are trying to make us fear, dehumanize and demonize one another. They used these same tools to reduce us to being **"those others" or "tribes" or "collections of people unlike us" rather than** human beings created by one God. Even the TPLF/EPRDF Constitution does not call us **"we the people of Ethiopia,"** but instead calls us **"ethnic groups" or "nationalities"** making us a divided people from the beginning. We can blame this regime for trying to make us forget about our humanity, but it is up to us to reject wrongful thinking so we do not fall into the pits they have dug for us.

To my fellow Ethiopian brothers and sisters, I call on you to reject extremism of any kind: ethnic extremism, Muslim extremism, Christian extremism, tribal extremism, feudal extremism, national extremism. All of these should be discarded if we want to get our country out of the mess it is in and to pass on a healthy Ethiopia to our descendants.

Some of the non-Muslim Ethiopians may be suspicious of those rallying for their religious rights, saying that what they want is different from what we want. This is exactly the reaction Meles is looking for and he recently incited more fear and division in his talk before the parliament, but he is the one who is afraid of us demanding equal religious, civil and human rights for each other. Let us restore the Ethiopian legacy of religious freedom and tolerance and be an example to our conflicted world; starting by building a bridge between fellow Ethiopians. This means we cannot let these members of our Ethiopian family rally alone.

It does not mean that our past history was always right. In other words, **we should not forget about the oppression towards others of different ethnicity or faiths or where there has been discrimination or marginalization of Muslims, Christians, Jews or others or where we have mistreated the weak, the vulnerable or dark-skinned of our society.** The reason we must truthfully remember this is because when we acknowledge our wrongful actions or mistakes **it will help us create a New Ethiopia where we value the humanity of each and every one of our people.**

Now we all should stand together because the freedom that our Ethiopian Muslim brothers and sisters want is the same freedom the rest of us want. Let us join hands together, standing side by side as one people who have been created by one God and as one family, our Ethiopian family. The peace, security and the stability that we are looking for will not come from an outsider—not from a foreign land, but with God's help, it must come from us, the people.

To religious leaders: we must start talking and reconciling among ourselves. We must refuse to pass on this unhealthy ethnic or religious apartheid government of Ethiopia to our newborns. Today we need each other more than ever to make this happen. When we honor God, we respect and protect those precious children He created, regardless of the religion we or they follow, the skin color we have, the region from which we were born, the language we speak, the tribe that we come from, the wealth that we have or the gender we are.

I call on all of you to reconcile with those people who are around you and then those in your community. The NEW Ethiopia we seek must start with new hearts, new minds and new thinking that honors God and values human life. Here is an outstanding recent example. A group of Ethiopians in Toronto demonstrated these values last week when they came out to rally against the destruction of the Waldeba Monastery and 18 churches in Gondar. Rallying side by side next to an Ethiopian Orthodox priest and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was a Muslim imam with other Muslims and an evangelical pastor and other evangelical Christians.



Well done, Ethiopians of Toronto! You have demonstrated what this all means! This is what a New Ethiopia will look like!

We the people of Ethiopia are suffering so much death, pain and sorrow in so many different forms, both within and outside of our country. Our women are suffering in the Middle East. Our young men are leaving the country and dying on the road or in refugee camps as they seek freedom. Our children are hungry. Our little girls are selling their bodies on the streets. Our elders are dying with no one to care for them. Our mothers are suffering to feed the family. Our people are being displaced from their land so it can be given to foreign investors. Our intellectual freedom fighters are locked up in jail cells. All this darkness has overcome our country—so much bleeding in this land. Will we pass on this pain or can we do something about it?

If we ask God how long this suffering, misery and pain will go on, the answer may return in an echo—“for as long as you fail to love each other.” This calling is for the living; not for the dead who have already done their share. You can continue to sit aside or you can help bring compassion, justice, inclusion, harmony, respect and dignity to the next generation.

May God help us to realize our responsibility and show us the straight path. For anyone who is seeking justice, we are here to stand with you.

Your brother,

Handwritten signature of Obang Metho.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blog.ethiopianmuslims.net/?p=2044>