



Ethiopia in Danger! Is There a Way Out Without Our Mutual Destruction?

*A bumblebee, if dropped into an open tumbler, will be there until it dies, unless it is taken out.
It never sees the means of escape at the top, but persists in trying to find some way out through the sides near the bottom.
It will seek a way where none exists, until it completely destroys itself.
(Taken from an online message circulating on the web.)*

Word is out in the Ethiopian community that Meles Zenawi is seriously ill or may even be dying. It has caused many to speculate—or panic, depending on one's position—about the future of the TPLF/EPRDF should Meles be suddenly gone from leadership, whether the reason is poor health, death or retirement—forced or voluntary—if rumors about an internal power struggle are correct.

This is a critical time for the future of Ethiopia and we in the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE) seek to speak out regarding our position; knowing that some may have a different point of view; however, as stakeholders in the future of Ethiopia, we are highly concerned about how Ethiopians can shape the future for the better. Promoting a national dialogue that takes into account the value of putting “humanity before ethnicity” and the equally important value about caring about others—our Ethiopian brothers and sisters—because “no one will be free until all are free,” will make a difference in the outcome.

Even prior to the formation of the SMNE in 2008, as the ethnic-based organization, the Anuak Justice Council (AJC), some of us came to understand the critical importance of confronting a “system” of injustice that transcended our own ethnicity, in order to encompass the similar needs of others and to gain their cooperation in a mutual struggle for freedom. So after the release of Kinijit leaders from prison in 2007, when these leaders began to struggle with internal differences, the AJC sent them an open letter, exhorting them to reconcile for the greater good of the country and offered to mediate if need be.

In order to avoid the breakup of Kinijit over these internal differences—seen at the time to be a great defeat for the people—we suggested that they, and others who might join them, might more easily overcome these differences by transforming themselves into a broad-based umbrella movement with the shared goal of eventually creating an environment conducive to genuine democracy and political competition. As we all know, Kinijit died, and with it the momentum of the shared struggle slowed to a crawl. See the link to read open letter to Kinijit leaders <http://www.anuakjustice.org/downloads/070922OpenLetterToTheKinijitOrCUDPLLeaders.pdf>.

In 2008, we took our own advice and created the SMNE, with the mission of working for the interests of all Ethiopians, regardless of ethnicity, political viewpoint, religion or other identity distinctions. Some mistakenly viewed the SMNE as an opposition political party to compete against, but from the outset, the SMNE was a movement to transform the minds of the people, including the TPLF/EPRDF. So in 2009 when Meles began violating indigenous land rights, the SMNE sent a letter to him and to the public. See the link to read letter to Meles <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/091130OpenLetterToPrimeMinisterMelesZenawi.php>.

In 2009, when Birtukan Mideksa was in jail and the UDJ were fighting among selves; again, we sent an open letter to UDJ leadership. See the link to read the letter <http://www.solidaritymovement.org/100428OpenLetterToUDJLeaders.php>. These are only a few examples of the many issues we have raised concerning important matters involving the well-being of all Ethiopian people.

Today we, as well as the TPLF/EPRDF, are in a serious predicament and the way out may not be a well-travelled path but a different alternative that must focus on reconciling a country that otherwise will remain stuck—and miserably suffering—at the bottom of humanity for who knows for how long. We have missed countless opportunities for a better Ethiopia in the past. Reconciliation, with the restoration of justice, could have been an option at the death of Haile Selassie, but leftist ideology of the student movement prevailed, summed up with bravado in the statement, “We will start a revolution on the grave of our enemy.” Instead, the “revolution” that followed became the “Red Terror” of Mengistu and prepared the way for the embittered and oppressed to start the next revolution. Again, reconciliation and the restoration of justice could have changed the future of Ethiopia; but instead, when the TPLF came in, they still believed in the ideology of ethnic liberation and chose the same destructive path of “a Marxist-Leninist revolution.” Few really challenged the TPLF because they also endorsed this “ethnic-liberation” model and thought they would benefit.

When Meles and the TPLF came to power, they used well-calculated, “divide and conquer” strategies to undermine any attempts to unite the majority of people against them, especially because their own ethnic group, the Tigrayans, made up such a small percentage of the population. The chief contender, the Eritrean Peoples’ Liberation Front (EPLF) they disempowered by giving away Eritrea, necessary for their own survival, but making the country land-locked.

Their tactics were successful as ethnic groups, political groups, separatist armed groups and religious groups fell into TPLF/EPRDF traps—not with reluctance, but with vigorous cooperation. Their entrapment was made simple because many people did not question what was at stake. *Through it all, the TPLF/EPRDF used their hold on power to shore up, as quickly as they could, all the perks, opportunities and assets the country had to offer and used them to reward themselves, their own ethnic region and favored groups; particularly family members, party loyalists and cronies. It put these favored few in a predicament of their own. Others became so outraged with this preferential treatment that Tigrayans, as a whole, became increasingly alienated from the mainstream. The mainstream, which in itself is not a unified group, but is instead made up of many different factions, all now are connected together by their anger towards the TPLF/EPRDF and their beneficiaries.*

Especially following the 2005 election, anything that could bring change to the country has been attacked by the TPLF/EPRDF. This regime has eliminated all political space. There is no opposition. The TPLF/EPRDF regime now controls 99% of the parliament. The media and all access to information are tightly controlled. They have destroyed most of civil society and its institutions and now control nearly all businesses.

The TPLF/EPRDF regime is one of the most corrupt in the world as those in power steal the land, resources, opportunities and lives of the people. Everything is a pretense and contradicted by the truth on the ground. The TPLF/EPRDF pretends to give equal opportunity when everyone knows that one group, their own, dominates everything. Even the pseudo-representation of various ethnicities within the EPRDF can be seen as a ruse to use “puppets of diversity” to prop up the TPLF leadership and their families and friends. We all know this. For example, Haile Mariam Dessalegn, Deputy Prime Minister of Ethiopia, should be the next in line, assuring a some transition should something happen to Meles, but in Ethiopia, this is unlikely to happen because he is not a Tigra and from the wrong tribe.

As Meles fights for his life, the TPLF/EPRDF-controlled courts just sentenced 24 Ethiopian journalists and activists who were convicted on terrorism charges to sentences ranging from eight years in prison to life. This all may be a moot point right now. Even though the TPLF/EPRDF may have the money, the guns and the power, the TPLF/EPRDF may become encumbered in their own self-imposed prison as they face the tremendous pent-up anger from the majority. No one can get out of this “jail” easily. Many regimes who have led like this, for example, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, must reckon with the serious consequences of their actions. An example is Bashir Assad of Syria who will use the well-worn path of dictators in fighting until death, at any cost to his followers or opponents, out of fear of going down like those who preceded him.

When we have a regime like this, the future looks dim—a future much closer to ending if Meles “leaves” before his “fight for regime survival” starts. Keep in mind, at the height of the famine last year, Meles had ordered 200 tanks in anticipation of fighting his own “Arab Spring.” He may never see it; however, Meles will not be easily “replaced” for he has ruled the TPLF, and subsequently, the TPLF-dominated EPRDF, as its iron-fisted leader ever since he was a rebel in the bush. He has wooed the West while tyrannizing his own people and exploiting their assets. Many are now wondering how the absence of Meles from the helm of the TPLF/EPRDF might unbalance its inner workings, even bringing it to an abrupt end, as different stakeholders vie for power and control. If Meles leaves, the status quo will be impossible; however, even in the unlikely scenario of his return, rumors emerged, prior to his decline in health, which inferred that half of the top TPLF/EPRDF leadership were ready to oust him from power while the other half feared that the party would collapse without him. Allegedly, before the meeting could conclude the following day, he was rushed to Brussels for medical treatment. He has not returned since that time.

Rumors that Meles may be seriously ill and close to death may be credible. He has not been seen since June 18, 2012 and has not shown up for two very crucial meetings where he typically plays a significant role. The first was the end-of-the-year meeting of Parliament when the final budget should have been presented by Meles along with the prime minister’s address to Parliament. Secondly, he did not show up for the African Union meeting held today (7/13/12) in Addis Ababa, but no one in charge is talking about it.

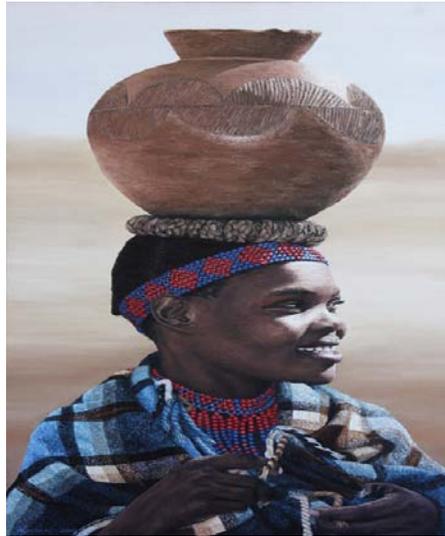
Why the secrecy? Is it because the “system of power” Meles has advanced was on a downward spiral already; however, if he dies now, his death may also signal the “political death” of the TPLF/EPRDF. No wonder his health condition is being hidden from the public. TPLF/EPRDF leaders need time and are ill-prepared to enter into such an urgent political struggle for power that may cost them dearly if they do not cling to it. We already hear of the rise in power of Azeb Mesfin and the animosity she is creating towards herself and among others who resent her power. These are TPLF loyalists like Bereket Simon, the generals who are with Meles and those opposing him, or Arkebe Equbay’s group, who are ready to usurp power and to try to keep the status quo—especially for the sake of Tigrayans. Then there is the Hailemariam Dessalegn factor and the rise of the Southern Nations and the Oromos let alone the Amharas, the Ogadeni, the Afar and others.

They also may be forced to taste the poisonous fruit of the ethnic-based venom they have so successfully spread over the past twenty plus years, which has alienated the people of Tigray from the rest of the Ethiopians. At the same time, the “Anti-TPLF” campaign, set in motion by some in the Diaspora, whether we like it or not, has furthered that hostility.

Whether Meles leaves office for health reasons, death or through voluntary or forced retirement, we in the SMNE believe we should be preparing for a “post-Meles” Ethiopia. We Ethiopians would be in a better position if our ideas for “our shared tomorrow” were more compatible with each other; however, they not only differ, but in some cases, strongly compete with each other. Could his departure bring some better but unanticipated alternative, the less-taken path, which would otherwise be closed off? Let us look at the present situation.

If Ethiopia is to emerge from a “post-Meles era” with enough strength to meet the challenges of the future, the people of Ethiopia must seek reconciliation, genuine justice and a “changed mindset” that will shape the agenda. If Ethiopians, including the TPLF/EPRDF, refuse to give up our present “us versus them” mentality or our tribal-based, “winner take all” culture, we will set into motion a destiny more similar to Rwanda, Kosovo or Syria.

Our future as a Country is fragile, like a large clay pot filled with water that many of us want to quench our thirst.



It is being fought over by many desperate families who could all have a drink if they so decided not to fight over who should carry it. Instead, as many hands try to snatch it away from others to gain control of the water, the clay pot falls to the ground and shatters; the precious water spilling out all over the ground. No one gets a drink.

What kind of future do we want and what kind of choices will lead to it? Will we choose revenge or justice? Will we choose tribalism or feudalism or the affirmation of the dignity and worth of all Ethiopians? Will we choose hatred or reconciliation? Will we choose truth or deception; accountability or corruption; decency or exploitation; civility or ignorance? The people of Ethiopia can stubbornly choose to continue an evil, greed-based and immoral system that will perpetuate our present condition or choose a new future to a New Ethiopia by taking a different path—one that is God-honoring, life-affirming, justice-seeking and peace-building.

Without reconciliation between Ethiopians, we will “break the clay pot.” Reconciliation is the only way out of this crisis, but will the TPLF and other Tigrayans see this? If they can see it, are they willing to do it? If they did, would other groups be willing to accept them or would these opposing groups want to defeat them as “the enemy” regardless of the costs? Is it more about defeating the enemy or is it about “transforming the enemy”—whoever it is—for the betterment of everyone. We must strategically think rather than emotionally react. We all have a lot to lose if we do it in the wrong way.

Many Ethiopians believe they have already lost almost everything to the TPLF/EPRDF so that they have nothing more to lose. This is a dangerous position to be up against unless all sides are willing to make concessions, especially those who have held control and received countless benefits from their position. Those holding the power also have the most to lose if they attempt to continue to hold on to everything. It is foolish for them to count on the continuation of the TPLF/EPRDF because the longevity of this is as precarious as the health of their leader (Meles).

Even though the TPLF/ERPFD will say Meles is only one person, not the whole party, the truth is that when he leaves, it will never again be the same. Once Meles is out, the inevitable struggle for power will ensue for it is highly doubtful that the TPLF/ERPFD will agree on a successor. Even now we hear that the struggle has begun.

At the same time, many in the opposition will fight for the power in order to secure a better life for themselves and their own group, but not necessarily for others or for the country. Within every major group are divisions and struggles, some for individual or group power and dominance and some for noble reasons. How can Ethiopians succeed as a people in this atmosphere?

Ethiopia is known as the birthplace of coffee. It does not matter which tribe one is from because the ritual of coffee drinking is celebrated throughout Ethiopia. There is someone to take care of the clay pot or (JEBENA) which brews the Ethiopian coffee. This person usually is someone others respect and trust to handle the pot with care; understanding its fragility. As the coffee is prepared, the people sit by, respectfully waiting for the coffee to be served. When it is served, the people again wait patiently for their turn. No one is left out and no one demands to be served first or to get all of the coffee for him/herself. Everyone gets their coffee. That is part of the ritual.

Now consider the coffee pot as a symbol of Ethiopia. If you look at a map of Ethiopia below, you may see how it resembles a coffee pot with its top, Eritrea, already missing.



The handle is Gambella; the spout is the Somali /Ogaden region, the neck is Tigray and the container is Oromia, Afar, the Amhara region, Southern Nations and Benishangul-Gumuz. *What will happen when people start to fight over it? If someone pulls on the handle, the neck, the spout or the container itself and it breaks into pieces, no one will benefit and they will all lose.*

What we are facing is not about Meles, but about Ethiopia as a country which has enough resources and hard-working people for all its citizens to prosper. For the sake of the country, we must admit where we have done wrong and be willing to make the necessary changes. It will be difficult but not impossible. It will be a bitter pill but it will cure us.

Others must also be willing to accept these changes. There must be some compromise, like was done in South Africa, rather than a preoccupation with revenge and a determination to take everything away from the enemy or the rest of the people outside our own group. This kind of “vendetta-mindset,” shaped the TPLF following the Dergue and was played out against anyone of Amhara ethnicity. Now, the Tigrayans or EPRDF members are the target and the deadly game can start all over. Who will be next as many are thinking that it is their “turn to eat.” This cycle will not get us anywhere and must stop, but to stop it, the TPLF/EPRDF, as well as others, must be pro-active in bringing it to a halt. The TPLF/EPRDF needs to think about it. The opposition needs to think about it.

In Rwanda, in thirty days, 800,000 people were killed. Over 14,000 people have already been killed in Syria and the fighting there is still going on. The infrastructure of their country is destroyed. The same thing was done in Libya. How many years will it take to recover what they lost, let alone to move ahead? Things could get worse for all of us. An “us” and “them” approach is not the way out. We cannot focus on seeing others as the enemy and hope to bring about a New Ethiopia. TPLF leaders are in a position to do something to avert disaster; the opposition is too.

Reconciliation is the only way out but it is not a “free ride” for some must be humble enough to stand up to admit the truth and to be bold enough to choose change. From what we hear, people within the TPLF/EPRDF are panicking and trying to calculate their next move, but they and we are all caught in a trap. Like in the case of apartheid, someone—a leader or a group— must stop pretending that the Tigrayan region or many of the people, perhaps not all, have not benefited from the blatant, ethnic-based favoritism of the TPLF/EPRDF. The truth must be told. What has gone on is wrong, unjust and immoral. Some Tigrayans did not ask for this and had little choice in the matter. We understand this.

Some Tigrayans may already be ashamed of this and be ready to come out and say it. Be the first to do so. Come out and say loudly, “NOT IN MY ETHNIC NAME!” It will never be too late to say this. Some may already have stood up for what is true, right, just and fair and suffered for it at the hands this regime. Some Tigrayans, TPLF and EPRDF members may be disillusioned with the TPLF/ERPFD and be ready to leave it for good. Others never believed in it but joined to get a job or an education. Some will be ready to use the well-known excuse, “I was ordered to be part of the TPLF/ERPFD.” However, the commitment of most to the TPLF/EPRDF may be extremely shallow, except for some in top leadership who have the most to lose; yet, even they may be ready to stand up against it.

Now is the time for the truth to start coming out, no matter how painful it is; however, it must be genuine. Fake humility, fake apologies or fake talk of reconciliation that is opportunistic will never get us anywhere for hatred, deception and raw self-interest will remain in their hearts. Instead, we need a different kind of revolution.

The revolution that must start should begin in the heart, soul and mind of every person. Unlike the cry from the past to start a revolution from the grave of our enemy, our revolution must put to death a intergenerational system and mindset that has brought so many tears, so much blood and countless graves. This kind of thinking will never bring about a New Ethiopia. The vitriolic hatred and anger between the people of Ethiopia has gone on too long; with different groups claiming entitlements or grievances that have gone unresolved for decades or longer. The destructive politics that exclude "other" Ethiopians as "less worthy" or "less Ethiopian" or as "the enemy" should be buried for good. Some are so angry over years of injustices that they do not want to even hear the word "Ethiopia" or see the flag of Ethiopia or speak the national language of Ethiopia. The TPLF has spread this hatred but others have carried it on. Now everyone is alienated. Ethiopia may never have been colonized but has become tribally colonized because the worst aspects of tribalism have infected us.

Ethiopia is one of the few countries in the world where the constitution begins "we the tribes" rather than "we the people." We are alienated within our "tribes" as well. This is fomented by some radicals at home, but especially in the Diaspora, and has created even more animosity. It has created a "Tigray versus us" dilemma that must be resolved if we are to build a New Ethiopia. This deadly poison must be detoxified, filtered out or drained from our system of self-destruction; or, like the analogy of the bumblebee at the beginning of this article, who kept trying the same useless ways to free itself, we also will fail to look up and see the way out.

Right now, everyone wants power and to be the next Meles and some opportunists will pick up on the language of reconciliation, without genuineness, as a shortcut to advancing themselves or their groups, but we the people should not allow a hijack before we ever have a chance to build a New Ethiopia based on putting humanity before ethnicity and where our system supports the freedom and rights of all our people, not just a few.

The exit strategy from failed, revolutionary, ethnic-based cycles of tyranny is reconciliation and the restoration of justice for all. For you bystanders, of all backgrounds—including Tigrayan, who have discarded "ethnic-liberation" for human or national liberation, your time has come. Your country needs you. For those of you who believe in reconciliation and the restoration of justice; it is now your time. This is what you have been waiting for; history does not have to be repeated. You have a message of life! We need to hear you!

Now, with the tension between the TPLF/EPRDF regime and a coalition of Muslims and Christians, the latter who have come out with a joint statement that they will be protesting together for religious freedom, starting this weekend and going into next week, has frightened the TPLF/EPRDF. It led the regime to warn the people to not come out on national television. Their warning has been ignored and a clash between the Muslims and the security forces has broken out today (7/13/12), leaving 4 protestors' dead, 16 wounded and many more arrested.

There is a way out for you and for us but let us make sure it satisfies our thirst for justice and our hunger for what is right and good. Beware of the opportunists coming from all directions who would want to be the next TPLF/EPRDF; exploiting this window of opportunity for their own self-interests. The people of Ethiopia deserve more than a government that is simply somewhat better than the TPLF/EPRDF. Ethiopians seek a government of the people, for the people and by the people which will uphold the value and rights of all its citizens.

We in the SMNE urge Ethiopians to choose a new path to a New Ethiopia; one which will lead us away from imminent destruction and towards a more united, cooperative and prosperous Ethiopia.

In conclusion, we in the SMNE are ready to contribute our share and are also available to facilitate in any way we can.

May God's hand of judgment be heavy on us as individuals and collectively as a society until our guilt turns us toward what is right, what is true and what is good. Only then will we be freed! May God fill each and every Ethiopian heart, soul and mind with love, forgiveness and a ready spirit to admit and correct wrong towards each other so that we become a blessing not only to the living of today but to those in generations to come.

May the name of our Almighty God, who calls us to choose the way of truth, love, justice and compassion, guide us on this previously untaken road to a New Ethiopia!

Please do not hesitate to e-mail your comments to Mr. Obang Metho, Executive Director of the SMNE at: Obang@solidaritymovement.org. You can find more about us through our website at: www.solidaritymovement.org