



September 5, 2012

## A Letter to Ethiopians:

**Mr. Obang Metho encourages Ethiopians to not be discouraged by the fictionalized legacy of Meles because any government that stages the mourning for its deceased leader is a government in trouble. It is a sign of internal and external weakness and marks the beginning of the end of a dictatorship. The people of Ethiopia should take hold of this opportunity to demand intellectual freedom, rights, justice and a peoples' government.**

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### My fellow Ethiopians,

Our difficult journey together with Meles at the helm is over. The official TPLF-controlled mourning for him has ended. Many of you may be worried about the unknown direction of our country following Meles' death, the infighting among the TPLF insiders for power and the absence of a strong alternative on the ground. There is an answer and it involves you at the grassroots.

We now need the people of Ethiopia, many of whom have not previously been involved, to take ownership of the direction we take as a people, like has been done successfully in other countries like Benin, Ghana, Zambia and South Africa, in order to ensure that our people—the primary stakeholders of Ethiopia—are controlling and managing our country's transition from dictatorship to a free and democratic Ethiopia.

Together we begin a new day; yet, most of us are still reeling from the shock of how Meles' brutal authoritarian legacy was publically portrayed so glowingly by both insiders and foreigners. What did we expect other than a charade? Probably nothing marked the Meles era more than its creation of a "sham Ethiopia" through pervasive intellectual dishonesty and the destruction of the people and the watchdog institutions meant to challenge it. After this week's extreme measures to give the pretense that Meles was loved by the people—when he so brutally tyrannized them—should make us, the people, all the more determined to dismantle the foundational pillar of his and other dictatorships—intellectual tyranny. If we do not want to "live a lie," each of us must start speaking the truth today—it is a powerful weapon against an evil system.

The famous Czech dissident, Vaclav Havel, who later became the country's first president, wrote in his essay, *"The Power of the Powerless,"* how the "crust presented by the life of lies is made of strange stuff. As long as it seals off hermetically the entire society, it appears to be made of stone.... [until] a single person breaks the rules of the game, thus exposing it as a game—everything suddenly appears in another light and the whole crust seems then to be made of a tissue on the point of tearing and disintegrating uncontrollably."

Meles feared intellectual freedom above all threats and waged an unceasing war against it; using his abilities to ruthlessly and systematically attack it from every possible angle. He was effective. It therefore should not surprise us that some of those eulogizing him created an "imaginary" Meles that none of us knew. Meles was a master illusionist, able to persuade or intimidate many to his point of view, carefully "managing" any facts—or voices—from the ground that might "interfere" with achieving his objectives. This was a man who cared so greatly about his image that he brought the "art of deception to a new level." No wonder his funeral and now his legacy are being so highly staged. The fact that the bogus mourning of Ethiopians could only be accomplished through intimidation, bribery and force is only further evidence of this manufactured legacy.

As many of our people were forced to cry or to come out to publically mourn his passing, I hear the bitter irony in the stories of some of them. For example, one of those forced to publically weep for Meles was an Anuak mother from Gambella whose son was a victim of the Anuak genocide. As you may recall, the plans for the genocide, called "Operation Sunny Mountain," began in the presence of Meles in his own office, according to official documents. The local government prevented this mother and others who had lost loved ones from an outward display of sorrow at the time as well as at memorial services as it would have cast a negative light on the regime. When recently ordered to cry for Meles, this mother refused. She said, "I could not cry when my own son was murdered by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces; why would I cry for the man who was in charge of the defense forces?"

In Meles' fictional Ethiopia—a falsified Ethiopia controlled by a narrow-minded, ethno-centric model of nations and nationalities that denied the people their rights based on ethnicity, rather recognizing their rights based on their humanity—Meles was called a visionary leader and a champion of the poor. Admittedly, some did benefit, particularly those beneficiaries from his own minority ethnic group—7 % of the population—and his own region as well as those chosen as demonstration sites funded by international donors; but outside of these, many Ethiopians are worse off as they have been neglected; or worse yet, they have lost their land and livelihoods to regime cronies and their foreign partners.

Had many Ethiopians truly been better off because of Meles, Ethiopians would have honestly wept for him without coercion. Those in government jobs and those students attending government schools would have freely mourned rather than been forced to do so on the streets of Addis. Even patients in hospitals were forced from their beds out to the streets. Security agents would not have made lists of people required to cry on the streets if these people would have truly benefited from Meles' policies.

Others would not have been beaten when they resisted, like the political prisoner who refused to cry inside prison before the cameras of the government-controlled Ethiopian Television station. To the outsider, it may look like Meles had a popular following, but to insiders, it was a demonstration reminiscent of the mourning for North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-Il last December. Deception has been a tool of the government and must be exposed.

Meles has won the war against intellectual freedom while he lived. Just because he is gone does not mean that the system that promoted and maintained false delusions is gone. The structures supporting this dictatorship—like intellectual dishonesty—must be dismantled and reformed or the movement to freedom and democracy of the people will be hijacked.

The national crisis in our homeland is not only about one ethnic group, one religious group, one regional group or one political group. For millions of Ethiopians living within the country, every new day brings the harsh realities of life under a system of dictatorship, but today, as never before during this regime, we have an opportunity. The dictator is gone and the system of dictatorship remains, but please understands this very clearly; the system requires the cooperation of millions of Ethiopians to sustain it. Do not do it.

We have an opportunity before us and if we are ever to see a free and democratic Ethiopia, we must seize what may be our God-given moment to reclaim ownership of our country. We the people of Ethiopia can join together, wherever we are, in restoring truth to our land as the cornerstone of a free society.

When the SMNE was formed in 2008, we envisioned a mission where Ethiopians would not be separated by ethnicity, but where we might all come together by individually and collectively doing our share to solve our common problems as one people and as one family—an Ethiopian family—for we are people who come from the same land, who breath the same air and who have the same thirst for freedom. We have now lived under a dictatorship for forty years and it has brought us to a dead end.

We in the SMNE, along with others, can work on a vision and plan for the country, but without the backing of the people, even Mandela could not lead. Only a force of Ethiopians, demanding their God-given rights by making noise in the public square, will give voice to the people and provide the legitimacy and authority needed for change. It will take a pluralistic voice of all Ethiopians—from every part of our country, from every ethnic group, religious group, and political group—to be heard.

Start by reconciling with your neighbor. Take his or her hand in yours as together we move forward to replace a dictatorial system with a free and democratic Ethiopia. Speak the truth! Expose the lies! Dismantle the criminalization of free speech! Be the single person who breaks the rules of the game! This applies to all Ethiopians, including the TPLF and EPRDF members, not only those opposed to Meles. It includes those who glorified him and who maintained his ethnic-based-apartheid system; for this system is coming to an end.

We hear the rumblings of the shaken unity of the TPLF/EPRDF from within and know its foundation is crumbling. It is a matter of time before it will collapse. It is like the African tree which only bears such bitter fruit that no one eats it—even the wild animals and birds. Yet, its fruit is so heavy that its weight can break its own branches and bring down the whole tree. The fruit of the tree brings its own destruction by itself. In other words, the sham policies of the TPLF have produced bitter fruit the majority of Ethiopians does not want and its infighting and rejection by the people will soon bring it down by itself.

Now, the TPLF central committee officials are trying to avoid their demise by refusing to give over power to those outside their own ethnic group. This is seen in their reluctance to appoint Hailemariam Desalegn, the Acting Deputy Prime Minister, as interim prime minister or by even refusing to call him acting prime minister. He is from the wrong tribe and therefore is not trusted by the TPLF inner circle. Meles put him into this position give the charade of diverse ethnic governance for public view, but it is now backfiring on the TPLF.

In conclusion, the TPLF/EPRDF has reached a dead end and has nowhere to go and now the only driver who knew how to quickly maneuver the ethnic train from impending destruction is gone. The collision of the ethnic train with the will of the people is imminent. The only way to rescue Ethiopians, including the TPLF/ERPFD supporters, is through reconciliation and the restoration of intellectual freedom and justice based on mutually beneficial interests.

The SMNE has been working behind the scenes to play a collaborative role in a meaningful people-empowered process to make sure that easy short-cuts do not hijack a movement to a transformed and reformed Ethiopian society.

May God help us, give us courage and protection, and be honored in all we do. May He show us the right road to truth, freedom, justice and reconciliation!

Your brother in our struggle for a New Ethiopia,

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