

Ethiopians at the 30-Year Anniversary of the ESFNA Soccer Tournament Model the “New Ethiopia”

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If we can do it here, why not back home in Ethiopia?**

I would like to take this opportunity to share my reflections of the 30-year-anniversary of the Ethiopian Sports Federation in North America (ESFNA), which I attended at the College Park, Maryland from June 30 through July 6. *What I witnessed as I watched and met thousands of people at this great gathering of Ethiopians was so extraordinary that I have been pondering it ever since. I saw the face of genuine humanity among Ethiopians and was very emotionally moved by it. My hope for a better future for Ethiopia is greater than ever.*



Sometimes we focus on the most discouraging issues and obstacles before us like the lack of political space, the arrest of journalists, activists, and religious leaders, the grabbing of land and resources, the displacement of the people, the human rights abuses, ethnic division, the hardship of life in the country and the ongoing exodus of our young people out of the country; however, *what I observed after being around so many Ethiopians all week was “the New Ethiopia” being put into action all around me. It was so remarkable and encouraging that I had to share it. I know that Ethiopians are people who, with God’s help, can be transformed, but seeing it played out before my eyes was inspiring!*

During the seven days I spent at the soccer tournament, where I was part of an SMNE team hosting a welcome center for the **Solidarity for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** {<http://www.solidaritymovement.org>}, *I saw Ethiopians, who did not know the tribe, region, religion or political view of others around them, treating those others with respect, consideration and civility. I wondered, if Ethiopians can do it so well here in America, why can they not do it in Ethiopia, especially if similar supports, actions and attitudes could be applied? It could make Ethiopia a haven, not only for Ethiopians, but for others as well.*



The ESFNA event was special this year as they celebrated their 30-year anniversary. This much-loved event began with its traditional opening ceremony, with thousands of people attending. Because of the crowded conditions, the people moved slowly, but patiently to their seats.

When it began, the players were introduced. The teams came from countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia, with numerous teams representing different states or provinces within these countries. The audience cheered for all the players and teams, not only for their own home teams. The opening also included a dedication of the event in honor of all Ethiopian women who give so much to our society.

In the stadium there were no sections where only Amhara could sit or only Oromo. There was no section set aside only for those from Tigray. No seats were reserved only for women or for the wealthy, the educated, the younger, the older, the light-skinned, the darker-skinned, the Muslim, the Orthodox, the evangelical, the Jew, TPLF-supporters, anti-government opposition members, nationalists, ethno-nationalists, secessionists or those in traditional dress. No, the people were mixed together in their diversity and the only differences might have been which team each wanted to win.

Everywhere was evidence of the joy Ethiopians shared as they celebrated coming together for this event. The fragrant smell of Ethiopian food, mixed with the sounds of Ethiopian music and people wearing the colors of the Ethiopian flag, all gave evidence of our heritage in a setting where no one was left out. The garden of Ethiopia was there.

This garden, especially on the celebration of the opening day, was made more brilliant as hundreds, if not thousands, of green, yellow and red balloons, matching the same colors of the Ethiopian flag, that was worn by many Ethiopians in the stadium, were released and ascended gently and quietly into the blue sky.

There was such a real sense of peace and harmony that it silenced the crowd for a moment before the people broke into cheers. Unintentionally, the shared experience brought a sense of shared humanity where thoughts of ethnicity, language, region, religion or things that have divided us were no longer important.



Why can this kind of garden not be planted in Ethiopia? No one will reject it— for who would not want an Ethiopia where our divisions are healed, our relationships are restored and where justice, truth and equality become the cornerstones of a well-ordered society?

The inclusive and respectful atmosphere continued even when 30,000 Ethiopians packed the stadium beyond capacity on Ethiopian Day, July 5, making it almost impossible to move through the throng. Yet, no one pushed or shoved others, trying to get ahead. There were long lines to get in only to be followed by more long lines to buy food, drinks or other wares being sold at the event. Even in the hot weather, people waited politely for their turn, standing aside to let mothers or fathers pass as they pushed strollers with their babies in them through masses of people.

I saw no angry disputes and no one seemed to be afraid of others picking their pockets or of committing some other type of crime. In fact, the reverse was true. A number of people lost their iPhones and those in charge announced it over the loud speaker. Before long, they were found and returned. Another person lost his passport, and the person who found it handed it over to the organizers who located the owner after announcing it to the public. *Even though most Ethiopians are not wealthy, attendees paid for their own tickets rather than waiting for some foreign aid to tend to their needs. No one was begging by the side—desperate, marginalized or forgotten—like is seen everywhere on the streets of Addis Ababa, mainly due to the extreme poverty and lack of opportunity that exists for many Ethiopians, particularly for those of the wrong ethnicity, regional background or political view. But here those same differences did not matter.*

If Ethiopians could experience this kind of life in Ethiopia would so many Ethiopians take such risks to leave the country? **Many of them choose to leave even knowing the hazards they may encounter. They have heard stories of Ethiopians dying in the Red Sea, in Lake Malawi, in containers in Tanzania, in domestic servitude in the Middle East, or suffering as victims of human or sexual trafficking in other places, but they leave anyway because they seek a place where rights and opportunity do not depend on things like being of a certain ethnicity or political affiliation.** *If those leading Ethiopia would adopt this vision it could be duplicated for so many of the people already seemed ready and able to carry it out; yet its implementation is held back by Ethiopia's leadership who have carried on a system of ethnic apartheid, dysfunction and abuse. However, it may not last.*

For example, in South Africa, a minority apartheid system which was controlling the majority and most of the resources, gave way under pressure from the people. A freer, more reconciled and more just society was established. The Jews have restored Israel as a land where they will not be oppressed like they were in foreign lands, only because they were of the wrong ethnicity and religion. Others have broken the cycle of oppression in their countries in order to make life more livable for the people.

We too can create this kind of environment within Ethiopia if we value all Ethiopians as our own and if we are able to think beyond our ethnicity. However, this hope is conditional, for unless we change our thinking, it is not achievable. The ideology of "my village", "my tribe", "my religion", "my region", or "my political party" will not work. Instead, we must replace "my" with "our." Ethiopia must be for everyone, not just one group.

The real problem of Africa is centered on this flawed thinking of "me only" or "my group only". *This destructive ideology opens up the pathway for Africa to be exploited by anyone, including foreigners. When this happens, outside forces can easily exploit the factions to their own advantage. If divided people are not careful, they will be vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by opportunistic outsiders who may pretend to side with them while taking advantage of them.*

For example, the Egyptians recently said they wanted to use some aggrieved groups to deepen divisions and conflict among Ethiopians. Who wins in such deals? Like Dr. Muhammad Shamsaddin Megalommatis who claimed to love what he called the oppressed Ethiopians, constantly reminding them of their grievances. At some points he attempted to incite them to violence.

We in the SMNE began to believe he was speaking in the interest of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt as well as Meles Zenawi of the TPLF/EPRDF who were equally terrified of a strong and unified Ethiopia. Yet, many of the oppressed were enchanted with him. When he tried to incite genocide in some of his articles, the SMNE decided to confront him and expose his hidden agenda to the FBI, to the host website and to the Ethiopian people. He disappeared.

We believe Dr. Muhammad Megalommatis may not have even been a person but instead the creation of an intelligence group whose goal was to weaken and destabilize Ethiopia so a stronger and more unified Ethiopia would not emerge. You must read our open letter to the Ethiopians and other Africans regarding Dr. Megalommatis in both language English and Amharic. The letter was entitled: **IS DR. MEGALOMMATIS SEEKING A FRAGMENTED AND WEAKENED ETHIOPIA/HORN OF AFRICA SO WE ALL CAN BE DIVIDED, CONTROLLED AND EXPLOITED?** To read it in English click at this link

http://www.solidaritymovement.org/100803MUHAMMAD_SHAMSADDIN_MEGALOMMATIS.php

And to read it in Amharic click at this link:

<http://www.solidaritymovement.org/amharic/100803Megalomatis.pdf>

If Ethiopians want a New Ethiopia—a peaceful place to live where human beings respect each other—I found it here at the Ethiopian Soccer Tournament, but how disappointing to have to celebrate this in a foreign place. Most everyone came simply as Ethiopians or even more so as human beings. Sheik Mohammed al Amoudi tried to divide the people with his money in order to hijack the soccer tournament from the federation. He sponsored a similar event at the same time at another stadium in Washington D.C., but it did not work despite all the money that went into it. Instead, Ethiopians freely chose to follow their consciences and to attend this stadium where the people were in charge. Money could not buy the people.

*Many Ethiopian people are confused by the internal debate between whether Ethiopia should have an ethno-nationalist or a nationalist government and how one or the other might be created. This soccer tournament, where many came together under one umbrella, serves as an example of what can work. **There are no other countries in the world, except for Ethiopia under the TPLF/ERPFD where the Constitution of the country begins with “we the nations and nationalities,” meaning “we the tribes” instead of “we the people.” This does not mean there is not regional autonomy like it is in America, Canada and in other places.***



If the same kind of unified country is to be established in Ethiopia, it must start with each and every individual and cannot be based on alienating one group from the rest; nor can it be created by focusing on past grievances or by thinking that your own group, whether a minority or majority, will dominate all others.

Ethnic domination, religious domination, regional domination or political domination will not work—only human domination. This is the life-affirming Ethiopia we seek. This is what the SMNE envisioned when it was established four years ago—*an Ethiopia where the humanity of our people comes first and where we care about the well being of each other because our individual and collective futures will only thrive when we stand up for others as we do for ourselves. This is the only way to bring lasting peace, reconciliation and harmony to our country. We really hope more Ethiopians can embrace this vision as their own; and not only endorse it, but also work for it to become a unifying view for the people of Ethiopia and beyond.*

One might ask, what makes over 30,000 people in one crowded place to act in such an exemplary manner? *The answer is that individual people are acting respectfully as human beings to other human beings. This is what made it all go smoothly. Over 30,000 people acted in harmony to create this environment; however, besides the people, the soccer federation, who put this all together, created an organization and rules of operation—like waiting in line for your turn—that applied to all equally.*

They are also based in a country (U.S.) where there is a well-functioning rule of law, where no one is above the law and where people are valued as humans, not as a tribe. This is why inside the stadium and outside there were police. In case something happened, the law of the land would be enforced. All these things made it work in harmony; however, in practice, the people acted with such amazing respectfulness in every regard that nothing more was needed.

The soccer federation, who envisioned this event thirty years ago, has made it one of the longest lasting institutions in the Diaspora. *Their dedication and extraordinary leadership continues to bring Ethiopians together every year and the rule of law in America maintains an atmosphere of respect, cooperation and civility among the people. Can this be done in Ethiopia? Yes, but only if Ethiopians think out of the ethnic box of the past with its old grievances, its victim mentality, and its domination mentality with its sense of privilege, entitlements and its prejudices towards others unlike themselves. Every country has its problems and negative past, but we Ethiopians have to move on for the betterment of everyone; however, this does include implementing systemic corrective measures and meaningful reforms.*

I believe this is possible in Ethiopia. Why?—because of the people! People who went to the stadium found it possible to do and if they can do it here, Ethiopians can do it at home. It is not like having to do research for years to find a cure for some complex disease. It is within our grasp.

One of reasons we in the SMNE were present at the stadium was because we wanted to give back. People have given us their thanks and support for the SMNE's advocacy work, but in many cases we have not had the opportunity to personally thank the people. I also want to give my heartfelt thanks to my colleagues, members of the SMNE and SMNE leadership, especially those who came to volunteer their time and energy at the stadium, namely Leyou, Emabet, Fekade, Tizita, Sophia and Yousaf. These are living examples of leaders who have come from different backgrounds and who are varied in age, religion and ethnicity but yet who are standing together to advance these principles.

It was so gratifying for all to meet and thank members of the greater Ethiopian family who came forward to also thank us for the work. These were people we had never met before. We did not know their names, ethnicity, religion, regional background, political affiliation or other particulars; however, when the majority of people approached me, they came with big smiles and open hearts. We shook hands and hugged each other. It was like we had known each other for a long time, but the truth was that it was the first time we had met in person and I had to ask who they were.

They reinforced what I had also learned from many other Ethiopians I have met around the world; that people, from every walk of life and from every corner of Ethiopia, want peace. As a result of thinking outside of an ethnic box and following it up by reaching out, I have now had the privilege of meeting these wonderful Ethiopians at the stadium. They have enriched my life and made me a better person, as have others I have met along the way.



This kind of acceptance between human beings is something that we can seek to enhance between the people of Ethiopia and beyond for neither our ethnicity, religion, regional background nor even our nationality should limit us from embracing human kind as defined by our Creator.

Ethiopian musicians of diverse backgrounds like my favorite singer Hanisha Solomon have been singing the song of humanity, genuine harmony and peace among the members of our Ethiopian family. With them, many of us have been dreaming of this kind of Ethiopia for our children—a country where their ethnicity, religion, language or color does not restrict them.

If the politicians leading the country or wanting to lead the country in the future can hear this song and listen closely to the dreams of the mothers and fathers for their children, we have hope that a New Ethiopia will emerge and grow into a beautiful garden of humanity. Each and every living Ethiopian, from every diverse group, should start sowing the seeds of these flowers of the future. These seeds should not be seeds of bitterness, hatred, isolation, revenge or division, but instead be seeds of love, compassion, forgiveness, respect, care and justice.

May God help each of us prepare the soil and plant seeds that will grow into a garden of great beauty in Ethiopia so we do not have to risk our lives to seek refuge in a foreign land in order to take hold of the absolute freedom to see, smell and experience the New Ethiopia in our own land.

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