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SMNE Applauds Non-Violent, Peaceful Struggle in Ethiopia as TPLF/ERPFD Tries to Intimidate and Label Opposition as Extremists

We in the **Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia (SMNE)** are deeply disturbed by illegal and violent actions by the TPLF/ERPFD that prevented the Semayawi Party from carrying out its peaceful rally on Sunday, September 1. Despite receiving the go ahead from authorities to stage this lawful rally nearly two months ago, with no warning, federal police stormed and ransacked Semayawi [also known as the Blue Party] headquarters on Saturday, August 31, 2013.

After first cutting off all electricity to their office, the TPLF/ERPFD police officers forcibly took over the office of the Semayawi Party. Leaders and volunteers working on final preparations for the next day's rally were beaten and kicked by authorities before being detained for a number of hours. After further harassment, interrogation and intimidation in detention, they were released, but the federal police maintained control of Semayawi headquarters until the next morning.

During that time, the federal police ransacked their office and confiscated and/or destroyed their computers, flyers, flags, T-shirts, banners, office documents and nearly all other Semayawi property; essentially making it impossible for the Semayawi party to move ahead with their plans for the rally.



Despite photographs and numerous corroborative testimonies by victims and witnesses of TPLF/ERPFD involvement in all of this, it is no surprise that the TPLF/ERPFD gave a very different account of what happened to the international media. When the Semayawi party requested a permit for the rally two months ago, they had allegedly been given a verbal okay, assuring party leaders they could proceed with planning; however, just this week, the TPLF/ERPFD reversed their authorization. Instead, the TPLF/ERPFD made plans to conduct their own rally, calling on the people to come out to applaud their government for its “religious tolerance” and to condemn and report religious extremists among them; particularly pointing fingers at Ethiopian Muslims who have been peacefully rallying for religious freedom for nearly two years, exasperating TPLF/ERPFD officials.

Rumors spread quickly that the TPLF/EPRDF intended to hijack the rally from the Semayawi Party as local authorities throughout Addis Ababa began an intensive campaign to pressure people to participate in the pro-government rally through the use of threats, bribes and intimidation, even promising to provide transportation to the rally so they would have no excuse not to attend. However, because the TPLF/ERPDP may have feared that Semayawi protestors would overtake their event, the federal police made sure they could not follow through by storming their headquarters and detaining the organizers. According to some sources, the TPLF/ERPDP event which was to draw 200,000 people, reportedly, drew fewer than 1,500 attendees.

The TPLF/EPRDF rally appeared to be done in conjunction with a large religious conference on inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious tolerance the Ethiopian Ministry of Federal Affairs and the Ethiopian Inter Religious Council had called earlier in the week. We believe the aim of the conference was to reassert TPLF/EPRDF authority over religious groups within the country and to delegitimize religious communities like the Ethiopian Muslims who were objecting to government control of their internal religious affairs. The government-controlled website, Walta Info, later reported that the conference was organized by King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue (KAICIID) along with the African Union Commission (AUC) and the United Religions Initiative-Africa.¹

According to a news release on August 27 from Walta Info, the conference theme was, “*We shall strive to realize Ethiopia’s renaissance through strengthening the value of religious coexistence and respecting constitutional provisions.*”ⁱⁱ At the conference, Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn called on religious groups and their followers to “*unmask undercover operations of religious fundamentalists*” and warned that the government would continue taking legal measures against religious fundamentalists who promoted intolerance under the disguise of religion [paraphrased].ⁱⁱⁱ

In truth, the real “undercover extremists” and “promoters of intolerance,” who need no unmasking, are the TPLF/EPRDF. However, their real goal is hegemony, including over the religious, even if they must call them extremists to do so; or, worse yet, to actually commit extremist acts in their name to sway opinion and gain support—a tactic used repeatedly since TPLF/ERPDP’s beginnings.

The TPLF/ERPDP, founded on an atheistic belief-system, see people of genuine faith—from any religious background—as a threat to their control and have pitted themselves against them. From the beginning, the TPLF/ERPDP has closely followed a Marxist-Leninist inspired plan laid out in 1993 where religious tolerance was only condoned if the religious remained silent or if their first allegiance was to the party of the TPLF/ERPDP. As one can read from the TPLF/ERPDP’s guidebook, “TPLF/EPRDF’s Strategies for Establishing its Hegemony & Perpetuating its Rule,”^{iv} one will see the plan to use and control religious groups. The following quote is from the 64-page Amharic document’s subsection titled; Religious Organizations:

“These[religious organizations]are always propaganda tools and in most cases they align themselves with the reactionary forces in the society. Therefore, these organizations should be used to disseminate the views of Revolutionary Democracy within a certain limit. If that is not possible we should try to curtail their obstructionist activities. The scientific content of the school education is one means of countering the damage which religious propaganda can cause. In the process of countering these organizations’ influence, the focus should not be on the leadership but rather on their branches at the village level; the religious leaders at the grassroots level are closer to the people. Without denying them due respect, we should mold their views, curtail their propaganda against Revolutionary Democracy, and even use them to serve our end. Focus on the lower level, however, does not mean the upper echelon should be forgotten. We should forge a close relationship with this stratum, find out and exploit to our advantage their internal contradictions, and at least disable them from coordinating their propaganda against us. If possible we should use them to disseminate the propaganda of Revolutionary Democracy.”

In fact, the conference and pro-government rally appear to be a TPLF/ERPDP attempt to discredit Ethiopian Muslims who have been peacefully rallying for nearly two years in response to TPLF/ERPDP religious interference, including the TPLF/EPRDF appointment of pro-government religious leaders, who they claim are trying to indoctrinate them, against their will, with a foreign brand of Islam. Other religious groups claim similar interference, all in violation of the Ethiopian Constitution that guarantees freedom of religion.

One of the goals of the Semayawi rally was to demand the release of political prisoners and Muslim leaders, the latter who had been organizers of previous peaceful rallies. It also should be remembered that Muslims, Christians and others joined with the Semayawi party in their first rally in June 2013 and the greatest fear was surely that all of these groups might join together and hijack the entire façade of the government to accuse others of what they were doing themselves.

The SMNE, which represents the diverse people of Ethiopia, stands in solidarity with the Semayawi Party, UDJ [Unity for Democracy and Justice], Ethiopian Muslims, people of all faiths and all Ethiopians who are seeking their God-given rights and an end to autocratic, one-party rule. The SMNE strongly condemns the reprehensible attack by the TPLF/EPRDF against law-abiding citizens. **The Semayawi party is not threatening violence or extremism. It is a peaceful movement to simply demand that the Ethiopian government follows the rule of law, respects the Constitution, repeals the draconian anti-terrorism law and restores political, human and religious rights to the people. The attack on the Semayawi party is an attack on all Ethiopians who simply yearn for a more peaceful, just and democratic society. When the rights of these people are violated, the rights of all Ethiopians are violated for no one is free until we all are free!**

We applaud the Semayawi Party and its extraordinary leadership, which in its commitment to a non-violent, peaceful struggle, has become a source of inspiration to many of us. Since 2005, when the TPLF/EPRDF killed 193 people and jailed opposition leaders, no other political groups have emerged to challenge the government until they did earlier this year. Though many of the leaders of the Semayawi Party are still young, they have demonstrated great discipline, intellect, courage, perseverance, resilience and a vision for an inclusive Ethiopia. They have chosen a peaceful struggle, a model which has succeeded in India under Mahatma Gandhi, in the U.S. during the Civil Rights movement under Dr. Martin Luther King, and in South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela in the ANC movement.

For the Semayawi and UDJ Parties to take this path is a better prospect for assuring that Ethiopia does not descend into chaos, violence and social upheaval that may be nearly impossible to recover from for years, if ever. Look at the great human and economic costs to the people of Syria, Egypt and Libya. Kudos to this committed group of young Ethiopians for the maturity, restraint and vision they have shown. On the part of the SMNE, we will do our best to present your noble cause to the donor countries and peace-loving people throughout the world.

The TPLF/ERPFD is afraid of this kind of movement and it is why they are trying to intimidate the leaders and to destroy Semayawi resources. Don't doubt the value and efficacy of a peaceful struggle. What they are doing we believe is the right thing and we encourage them to continue with this approach. We hope they will continue to stand for principles that will not only confront the TPLF/ERPFD but that they will also work to bring healing and restoration to Ethiopia. Our message to them is not to doubt themselves when some may question their position or their age. They should keep in mind that throughout the world, change has often come through the work of younger members of society. Ghandi was only in his thirties as was Dr. King.

The same accolades are deserved for those Ethiopian Muslim leaders who have persevered for nearly two years in a peaceful struggle for their human and civil rights, especially the right to pursue their faith in a genuine manner. In a country like our own, where people are so purposely divided by calculated actions of the TPLF/ERPFD in order to maintain minority rule, we must affirm the value of every person regardless of ethnicity, religion, political view, regional background, gender, age or any other characteristics. Our best guarantee of our own sustainable freedom in Ethiopia is in protecting the rights of other Ethiopians, whether or not they are like us.

We should never doubt the goal of building an Ethiopia where our people are valued by their humanity rather than by their ethnicity, where each Ethiopian cares about the well being of others as they care for themselves because we are all created with intrinsic worth by God.

An ethnic-based system where one ethnicity takes control of the society and where they receive unearned preference over everyone else is in violation of this principle. It will give birth to instability, insecurity, and conflict. The path to a New Ethiopia will not be through promoting violence and eradicating the TPLF or their supporters but through reconciliation—through acknowledging the past and correcting entrenched injustice.

As Ethiopians make plans for the next rallies and other efforts, we urge all to work with other parties, religious groups and peace-loving Ethiopians who share these principles. As you do, we in the SMNE will stand with you in solidarity.

May God help us see the right path and not be confused by emotions and false promises of quick fixes that lead us down a path of destruction, blood and revenge that has obstructed Ethiopia from moving anywhere. There is no room for ethnic-based domination, religious-based domination or power-grab domination by another dictator but only for a government that is of the people, by the people and for the people. Ethiopians have already suffered too much.

We seek a God-honoring path that will bring human liberation rather than ethnic, religious or regional liberation. May God lead us to renewed life as we value, nurture and protect the humanity of each and every one of us, putting humanity before ethnicity or any other distinctions, for no one is free until all are free.

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ⁱ <http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php/explore/10206-inter-religious-inter-cultural-dialogue-valuable-for-world-peace>- Inter-religious, inter-cultural dialogue valuable for World Peace, Sept. 3, 2013 (WIC)

ⁱⁱ <http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php/editors-pick/10099-national-peace-conference-kicks-off-in-addis>- National Peace Conference Kicks Off in Addis, August 27, 2013 (WIC).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} http://www.enufforethiopia.net/pdf/Revolutionary_Democracy_EthRev_96.pdf “TPLF/ERP/DF’s Strategies for Establishing its Hegemony & Perpetuating its Rule,” Sub-section: **Religious organizations.**